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Guns Roaring West

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A Powder Valley Western

By PETER FIELD

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Guns Roaring West

I.

ON A CRISP and breezy fall morning, Pat Stevens rode the drift fence along the extreme southern border of his range, his alert, easy bearing the mark of a thoroughly competent man.

Even in this remote corner there was a generous scatter of prime Lazy Mare steers, brindles, black and whites, and a sprinkling of Hereford reds to breed up the stock. Pat was engaged in a rough count of them when abruptly, in the midst of insect-buzzing quiet, a rifle ball slashed across the brush, clipping mesquite tops in its passage.

Pat read its meaning before the clap of the gunshot reached his ears. He froze for a moment and then, hurling his buckskin bronc sidewise, flashed into cover behind a high barranca as a second shot rolled over the range, breaking in ominous echoes. But even here he was not safe. Whoever had fired those treacherous shots was coming his way—fast.

Whipping his sixgun from its sheath, he slid out of the saddle and plunged up the crumbling bank toward the high brush above. He hadn't much time. Near the top his boots skidded, and rocks and dirt clattered down. He tottered briefly, arms wildly waving.

Hard on the instant, the sound of driven hoofs struck

his ears. Gunfire rattled a sharper menace; lead spat into the bank beside him, one slug screaming off a rock. A swift recovery of balance, one kangaroo leap, and Pat scrambled over the brink of the barranca, his chest heaving. Cautiously he peered out from the sheltering brush. He had found little time to consider the reason for this savage attack, coming as it had with slashing suddenness. Now he saw four grim riders, grouped close, racing on through the heavy mesquite. Pat's level brows knit as he watched. It was a relief to note that they showed no intention of closing in. Straight as an arrow, their flight cut across the range; there was contempt in their utter indifference to an obstruction so casually brushed aside.

"Shucks! They're not honin' for my hide," he murmured. "They're strikin' out for somewheres in a hurry, and I just happened to get in the way—"

He lowered his gun, not having troubled to fire a shot. It was just as well. Pat was under no illusion as to the character of men in such driving haste as this. Nor did any thought of pursuit or retaliation cross his mind. Caught as he was with only a belt-gun, he stood not the remotest chance against rifles in the hands of ruthless, determined men.

Pat waited till they had swept on out of sight and then clambered down to his horse. Swinging astride, he headed thoughtfully in the direction of the Lazy Mare ranch house. Face sober, he scarcely needed to be warned of what he had stumbled upon. It did not persuade him to rush into hasty action of any kind.

The four men had driven west toward the Culebras. They might be making for the high passes, or they

might not. Not again did Stevens glimpse them, though he watched.

At the ranch an hour later, he was puttering about the yard alone, still preoccupied with his adventure, when a clip-clop of hoofs on the road caused him to glance up sharply.

For a second he stared, caught. All tenseness dropped from him then and he stepped forward quickly, pulling his hat off in deference to the girl riding into the yard on a shining red mare and greeting her with his dark attractive smile.

It was Libby Haley, daughter of the new sheriff of Powder County. Small, of a trimness of figure that made her look capable as a boy, and yet possessed of all possible feminine charm, Libby had lived in Dutch Springs only a matter of months; but already she was known far and wide for her friendly, unassuming manner.

"Well! This is certainly an unexpected pleasure," Pat assured her, not neglecting his chance to admire her luxuriant, auburn-red hair or the candid blue eyes, clouded just now with trouble.

Her pretty lips twitched in an answering, rather rueful smile. "I'm afraid you won't think so, Mr. Stevens, when you've heard my news," she responded frankly.

"That so?" Pat's tone expressed polite surprise, though he already vaguely suspected what she would have to say.

Libby nodded. "There's been another robbery in town, I'm sorry to say. The hotel this time."

Though the words roughly confirmed his guess, he looked nonplused for an instant. "The hotel—? What in the world could anyone hope to steal there?"

"Mr. Henshew says two or three hundred dollars was stolen from the safe," she explained. "The bandits sneaked in before dawn, ransacked the office, and robbed several men as they came down to breakfast—"

Pat nodded in comprehension. "A bare-faced proposition," he murmured soberly. "This has been the third robbery in the past two weeks, hasn't it? . . . And I expect they got away clean again, as usual."

He affected not to note the frown that swiftly furrowed her brow at this unwelcome comment.

"They did—but it proved a near thing for them, this time," she said, the words fairly tumbling from her lips. "One of the guests yelled out of an upstairs window, and Father heard him. He fired into the office before he entered, and the robbers ran out the back to their horses. Father thinks he hit one of them, toward the last. He's trailing them with a posse now."

To Pat it sounded like a rather feckless performance throughout. He gazed away musingly. "You didn't hear whether any of 'em were recognized?" he asked.

"They were masked. Dad says they dodged about so industriously that he got no more than a glimpse or two . . . I wonder," she pursued ponderingly, "why I should have got the idea that he *did* know at least one of those men. He denied as much to Mr. Winters—"

"Suspicion is one thing," remarked Pat with a fleeting smile, as he swiftly recalled the four men he had seen riding across a corner of his range. Assuredly he would not have taken oath as to the identity of any of them. After a moment he went on. "What does Al Henshew have to say about it?"

"It's not exactly clear to me, but I believe he hadn't

gotten up yet—or was just getting up. Naturally, Mr. Henshew is pretty excited."

"He is, eh?" Pat was unable to picture the phlegmatic hotelman as other than his usual stolid self, regardless of the cause.

Libby nodded assent. "I take that as sufficient excuse for a number of rather wild accusations he seems to be making—"

"Accusations?" Pat repeated, with interest. "Sounds like Al had some fairly accurate idea who he intends to blame—"

"I'm not so sure." She appeared to be picking her words with care. "Mr. Henshew named several persons, without seeming quite certain just who he meant."

"Didn't hear my name mentioned, along with them accusations, by any chance?" challenged a new, hard young voice.

Pat whirled on his heel, palm sliding along his thigh close to the cedar-handled gunbutt. Even Libby was startled, and she turned in a flash to face the stern young fellow leading his bronc out from the corner of the saddle shed.

"Howdy, friend." Voice flat and reserved, Pat stared as he took in the hatless, blackheaded and slate-eyed newcomer, a startling replica of himself a dozen years back, even to the lean, determined-looking jaw. "Let's see. You must be Kyle Kershaw's son—"

"A good guess, Stevens," the other assented curtly. "I'm Will Kershaw." He paused, slanting a sharp glance at Libby Haley. "I expect the—lady sheriff recognizes the name, too—"

The son of a drifting rancher who had appeared on

this range only a matter of weeks ago, he seemed almost deliberately defiant. Perhaps he had, or believed he had, his own reasons for being offensive of manner now. The girl sat her saddle unmoved, studying his face from beneath furrowed brows.

"I'm not a 'lady sheriff,' as you call it," she returned with dignity. "But I *have* heard your name—"

"Nothin' good, I'll warrant," began the boy crustily.

"Something you wanted, Kershaw?" Pat put in abruptly, disinclined to suffer insolence in any form.

The young fellow did not immediately withdraw his eyes from Libby, regarding her with a mixture of interest and resentment. But at last he nodded.

"Reckon you've heard Dad's taken over the old Hall ranch, in the foothills," he muttered. "There's no water in the canyon, Stevens, after this dry season. We'll be waterin' our stock on Spring Creek, anyway—but Pop thought it'd be polite to let you know."

Pat suppressed a wry smile. There was little enough compromise in the boy's announcement. Spring Creek lay on Pat's west range, and he had always considered the water his own. He scrutinized Kershaw reflectively before replying.

"So the canyon's dry again, eh? Nothin' strange in that," he commented tonelessly. "Didn't anyone tell Kyle that was the main reason Hall couldn't make a go of it up there?"

Stubbornness flickered behind Will Kershaw's steady gaze. "Maybe so. But we'll have our own try," he retorted. "Dad insisted on lettin' yuh know—and now you do."

Stevens's mouth twitched. "All right, Kershaw. I've been meanin' to visit your father," he drawled. "But

meanwhile there's no pressin' occasion for me to save the Spring Creek water. I'll depend on your thanks," he concluded pointedly, "for the—temporary favor."

"But I thought—" began Libby impulsively, even as Kershaw flushed at the significant form Pat's consent had taken, but she subsided quickly.

"Yes?" Pat waited for her to go on.

"Isn't that exactly the way—range feuds start?" she faltered, plainly doubtful of the wisdom of Pat's conditional relinquishment of the Spring Creek water rights.

Pat laughed. "Doubtless some of 'em do," he admitted readily enough. "Not this time. Kershaw understands that I'll see to that."

Young Will, choosing to ignore the warning, fastened his bright eyes again on Libby. "What kind of talk is that?" he flashed, defensively. "Sounds like pure provocation, and nothin' else! I'll have you know, miss, the Kershaws are just as good—and just as honest and square—as anybody else!"

"I daresay we'll all subscribe to that," Pat inserted pacifyingly, aware of the girl's discomfort under this heckling.

"And furthermore." Will plunged on, his attention concentrated on Libby, oblivious of the interruption. "I'll remind yuh that neither you nor your old man control so much as a drop of water out here—"

"No. We're only called on to settle the bitter disputes which arise over the possession of water, or its—theft," she tossed back, with infuriating calm.

"Here now," Pat broke in, in good-humored protest before something unforgivable could be said. "Let's not go into a clinch over this!"

Manifestly these two young people were of a nature

calculated to strike sparks from each other on first sight. As he had shrewdly anticipated, his remark brought a scarlet flush to both, hauling them up short. Still they duelled dangerously with their eyes, and Pat deemed it best to break the impasse as speedily as possible.

"I'll talk to yuh further, Kershaw—as soon as Miss Haley tells me what brought her out here. I need hardly explain that your dad, and my creek water, were farthest from her mind."

Will did not take the broad hint and move aside. Libby hesitated uncomfortably, reluctant to speak before this obviously hostile listener. But Pat was waiting, with little less curiosity than Kershaw himself.

"I—came to ask you to change your mind, Mr. Stevens, about the deputy's star Dad offered you," she got out, with difficulty, but without lessening the urgency of her plea. "He needs you more than ever. I'm hoping against hope you'll see it that way—now."

The two men gazed at her, struck by the strangeness of her mission. Pat was the first to speak.

"Brad sent yuh here on that errand, ma'am?" he queried levelly.

"No, he didn't," she denied positively. "I came entirely on my own responsibility. If that seems unusual, it's because I've heard so much about you from—from Mr. Winters and others—"

"Beggin' Stevens to be a deputy now, are yuh?" Kershaw accused. "That sounds like it's aimed straight at my family! I know we're looked down on in town as no-account squatters—! First yuh rub it in with threats and accusations; then yuh set out to make trouble with our neighbors—"

Libby stared him down with flashing blue eyes. Indignation seemed only to make her prettier.

"That's enough, Kershaw." Pat rounded on him sternly. "You interrupted one conversation, if you'll recall, and I let that pass. Now you're doin' it again. I'll have to ask *yuh* to leave!"

Young Will flung himself toward his mount as if impelled by mortification. "I'll go of my own accord," he tossed back with bitterness, if without much logic. "No need of askin' what your answer to her'll be! But I overheard that about the hotel, Stevens. If *yuh* take the star, just don't try to drag *my* family into Dutch Springs affairs. That's fair warnin'!"

Pat only watched stolidly as he swung up into the saddle. There was a headlong violence in young Kershaw which reminded him strongly of his own bull-headed youth.

"And while I'm about it, don't forget I said we're usin' Spring Creek as long as it's convenient—regardless of whoever claims it," Will continued vehemently. "Tell yore dad he can make what he wants of that . . . Sheriff or deputy, we ain't runnin' from none of you!"

Kicking his horse about, he stormed out of the Lazy Mare yard.

"Well!" There was a faint wonder in Pat's exclamation which scarcely accorded with the anger he ought to have felt. "That was sudden enough—"

"It certainly leaves little or nothing to the imagination."

Pat smiled at the girl disarmingly. "Right you are. I wouldn't swear that young fellow likes me overmuch . . ."

She shook her head firmly. "No, I'm afraid it's me, Mr. Stevens, that Will Kershaw regards as his enemy. Surely he left little enough room for doubt!"

Pat nodded in agreement. "But we have this advantage over him, that it don't matter a heap what he happens to think of yuh," he said casually.

"Not in the slightest," she declared, promptly and forcibly. A silence followed the words. ". . . except that—you can understand my wish—"

Pat was frankly grinning at her. "If wishes had feathers, they'd make fine birds," he chuckled. "In other words, if Kershaw was less of a strong-headed young fool, he'd have known right off that you were makin' no references to him at all."

"You *do* understand." Libby smiled demurely.

2.

"YOU HAVEN'T given your answer to my request, Mr. Stevens," Libby reminded him deliberately, after a pause. "I'm terribly anxious for some definite word to give Father—"

He was abstractedly watching young Kershaw grow small, riding off across the range. His thoughts seemed far away.

"Call me Pat," he grinned turning back at last with some show of purpose in his manner. "That is, if you

can stand it after I've said no once more. Sorry . . . but a law badge just don't interest me. I'm an independent cuss—and if you'll excuse me, Miss Haley, there's a little chore on my mind right now that won't wait."

Touching his hat, with an admiring glance which somehow managed to convey surprise at Will Kershaw's brusqueness before her youthful charm, he turned away. She let him go, watching as he made for the corral, where he snaked a fresh bronc out of the heap, clapped saddle and bridle on and cinched up with expert speed.

With a final careless wave he swept astride and single-footed out of the yard, bearing north till the minutes had placed a mesquite swell and a line of cottonwoods along the creek behind him.

"That ought to persuade her that my 'sudden errand' has little to do with young Kershaw. And how wrong she'll be!" he mused to himself, smiling. Nor did it at all trouble him that he should find this small deception expedient. "No need of advertisin', even to the sheriff's daughter, that because I'm not eager to wear a star, it don't mean I'm altogether dead to whatever goes on around this range."

Knowing that he could no longer be observed from the ranchyard, he swung west, shoving the spirited roan between his legs into a brisker pace. Instinct warning him of where young Kershaw would inevitably head, he made straight for the Spring Creek bottoms, keeping to cover wherever possible and exercising caution in the open. He was not seen, nor did he glimpse anyone himself. Mounting a pine-clad ridge a mile from the creek,

he scanned the bottoms with some care. He was not surprised to see a couple of dozen Tumbling K steers gazing down there. Kyle Kershaw had moved in on the Lazy Mare water even before sending word that he intended to do so.

A moment later Pat froze, and then quietly moved deeper into the concealing pines. He saw young Will ride out on the creek and pause there, sweeping the silent hills with anxious eyes, on the lookout for any threat to the invading steers. Fortunately for him, perhaps, no Lazy Mare puncher would make independent discovery of the situation before Pat had time to pass the word that it was all right.

“Reckon I’d be anxious, too, in young Kershaw’s boots,” Pat reflected. “Not that he’s got anythin’ to worry about from my direction—yet. It’s Kyle I’ll be lookin’ to directly, for a plain statement of his intentions.”

Will lingered restlessly about the creek for another ten minutes, and finally set off. A short time later he disappeared amidst the piñons fringing the lifting foothills. Beyond rose the lofty Culebras, somber and grand.

“Making for his dad’s ranch.” Pat nodded, resolving on the moment that he would have his own look at the old Hall place, and whatever changes had occurred there during the brief tenancy of the new owners.

Crossing the creek without haste now, he followed a circuitous course upward into the hills, conscious before long that he had left Lazy Mare range at last and was on what might easily turn out to be forbidden ground. It did not deter him, knowing these hills as he did. He

knew men as well. Kershaw's tenure here could never be certain till he had proved himself.

Approaching the old ranch through canyon-scarred ridges, Stevens was working up a long cedar slant toward the vantage point above when he was startled by the swift, heavy crashing of a horse, charging through the thick brushy cover off to his left. Hauling in sharply, he gauged the meaning of this. Someone, maintaining a surveillance over his movements, was evidently determined to cut him off from above.

The unknown rider circled laboriously above Pat's position, with reckless indifference to the amount of noise he was making, and then abruptly halted. A waiting pause ensued, broken only by the deceptively peaceful chatter of magpies. Pat slid from the saddle, loosening his Colt in the scabbard. An old hand at this game, he had no intention of going off half-cocked. Nor did he make the mistake of attempting to cut his own wider circle, virtually every movement of a horse in this heavy undergrowth proving its own inevitable betrayal.

After ground-anchoring the roan, he moved off stealthily through the cedar clumps, making directly for where the other man had last been heard. Like a shadow he slipped through the brush, scarcely disturbing a twig. It took time; but in the present instance, it was not himself who was in a hurry. Fifteen minutes later, peering over a rocky ledge, gun in hand, he looked down, sardonically studying the bowed back of a man crouched in the scrub and watching the slope below.

For long seconds neither man made a move. Then

Pat lowered the hammer of his gun and slid it back into his belt. A smile of amusement wreathed the corners of his mouth.

"Just what," he broke the heavy silence, in measured tones of contempt, "would *yuh* say you were *doin'?*"

The short, stocky man below, thrashed around in a sudden panic, to reveal the blank, moon-shaped, and black-bristled visage of Sam Sloan—an acquaintance of endless years, and in many ways so close to Stevens that he could almost be called an elder brother.

He showed no such fraternal sentiments now, glaring disgustedly at Pat as he scrambled up on his pudgy legs, brushing the pine needles from his pants.

"Hell," he snorted wrathfully. "You, is it? Might've knowed as much . . . Seems like the more I do for *yuh*, the less I git out of it!"

"What," Pat inquired with ironic politeness, "would be the extent of your mighty labors in my behalf, in the present instance?"

Sloan snarled at him expressively and started away violently without a word, only to pause after half a dozen steps. "What was *you* *doin'* here, if it comes to that?" Deep curiosity edged the suspicious query.

Pat laughed at him. "So you're not leaving after all?" He was coolly indolent, climbing down from the rocks. "All the same, it was a good idea to ask. I'll talk—after *yuh* answer my question."

Sam's craftily pretended resentment washed away in a sheepish grin. "I *was* keepin' tabs on these cheap, range-grabbin' Kershaw hombres . . . all on yore account," he admitted cheerfully.

"My, my." Pat's sarcasm was gentle. "Bad as that, is it?"

"Why, dang it all, they're runnin' Tumblin' K steers plumb over onto yore Lazy Mare range right now! Don't tell me yuh ain't got wise t' that yet," exploded Sam.

If the announcement failed to elicit Pat's surprise as intended, it at least gave evidence that Sloan was as thoroughly aware of what went on as himself. Stevens examined his round, exasperated face in smiling reproof. "And what makes yuh so sure it isn't entirely with my express consent?" he countered.

That possibility, it was promptly made plain, had never so much as crossed Sam Sloan's mind. His face fell. He was not altogether vanquished, however.

"But blame it all, Stevens, it ain't *possible*! Don't tell me yuh'd ever *be* such a fool!" His protest was vehement. "Yuh can't trust one o' those Kershaws far's yuh could kick a bull—"

"No?" Pat's eyes widened in mock surprise. "What's the matter with old Kyle?" he asked innocently, less for information's sake than to draw the other out.

"That cud-chawin' old buzzard!" ejaculated Sam. "A land-grabbin' drifter—a has-been, poor as a peon, an' twice as shifty!"

Pat's frown was tolerant. "Reckon Kyle's had his hard knocks, at that. But there's young Will, now—he's not such a bad sort."

"Yes—an' there's brother Jap, too!" flashed Sam heatedly. "Thief, rustler, an' all-round bad egg, in my book. Mebby yuh can dig up a good word for him!"

Pat shook his head dubiously, aware that this time Sam's vehemence was not wholly without cause. He had run into Will Kershaw's brother before and, even dis-

counting the dark tales current concerning that individual, his impression of the other was unsavory to say the least.

"Don't forget," Sloan said soberly, "all that thievery in town commenced right after the Kershaw tribe landed here! They was chased plumb out of the Indian Territory, *I* hear—an' now they're settin' up in business ag'in! . . . Not such a bad sort, huh?" He snorted scathingly, in final condemnation.

Pat shrugged. "I'd be mighty careful who I talked that way in front of, Sam," he advised.

"*I am* bein' careful!" Sloan insisted. "Or don't yuh consider yoreself old enough t' listen t' man-talk?"

Pat ignored the sarcasm. "Well, I ain't put any of the Kershaws in my will yet," he remarked at last, dryly. "They're a pugnacious bunch, I'll grant yuh—the ones I've run into so far, at any rate. We'll have a better look at the set-up yonder, for what it's worth."

Sam readily agreed to this move. They got their horses and proceeded up the slope. Arriving at the crest, they found themselves gazing down into Trap Canyon, a huge fissure gashing the Culebra range in pine-clad zigzags.

The old Hall ranch had been built in the bottom of the canyon, at a point where spacious side canyons afforded ample feed for a sizable herd of cattle. Only water was lacking in this beautiful spot, for the craggy walls drained speedily after a storm, and the false creek racing down over bedrock soon faded to a seeping trickle in the dry season.

The buildings lay in a rocky cup far below, a tangle of rickety pole corrals huddled at one side. Several

gnarled old pines, grouped about the rambling log homestead, more or less cut off their view.

"Reckon we'll have t' work down there a ways, if we wanna see anything," Sam grumbled.

Fortunately they were able to work down to within two or three hundred yards of the ranch without any particular danger of detection, the steep slopes affording a variety of brushy cover. At last they were able to look under the spreading pines. The yard appeared empty of life, except for two saddled horses standing hipshot under one of the trees, switching at flies.

"That buckskin critter'll be Jap's crowbait," muttered Sam.

Pat's nod was brief. "And Will was riding the calico this morning—"

"Thought yuh was trailin' him when I ran into yuh," grunted Sam triumphantly.

There appeared nothing further to be seen as they waited, but Pat was in no haste. He scanned the layout with thoughtful care, endeavoring to estimate the capacity of Kyle Kershaw's pocketbook and the energy of his sons. He was still studying the yard when a figure suddenly staggered out of the ranch-house doorway as if violently propelled, running several steps before he could catch himself.

It was Will Kershaw. He turned to gesture angrily back toward the door. A second figure swaggered out to confront him, and Pat recognized the rawboned frame of Will's brother Jap.

"Oh-oh," breathed Sam alertly. "Somethin's up—"

The brothers argued heatedly, only the subdued tones of their voices rising up the canyon wall. Will

strode toward Jap, waving an eloquent hand, and they haggled briefly. Then Jap took a leisurely step forward and knocked his younger brother flat with a single sweeping blow. He was about to kick his prone victim when a bellowing voice from the cabin halted him.

"Buddies," Sloan chuckled. "Ain't that Jap a sweet customer?"

Pat shook his head slightly, scowling. "He's a black sheep, and no mistake . . . There's a row goin' on over somethin'. I think," he murmured, "I'll just mosey down there for a closer look—"

"Let's go," Sam seconded. "I wouldn't ask much excuse, myself, for a crack at that hard hombre—"

"Uh-uh," Pat vetoed as promptly. "You brought your rifle. I want yuh to stay here and cover me, just in case."

Sam's snaggle-toothed grin was briefly in evidence. "You the same gent that was talkin' twenty minutes ago?" he jeered. "I had the idea them birds down there was yore first cousins—"

Not bothering to reply, Pat swung up on his horse and turned its head down the slope. It was not easy to maneuver a way down, but at length he jogged out onto the canyon floor and approached the ranch.

Will still sat under a pine, back bowed, his expression dejected. Jap was just entering the house, but he turned back, his beady black gaze raking the newcomer suspiciously. He came striding out finally, a figure of curt authority.

"What yuh after, stranger?" he called.

Pat did not respond, looking the fellow over coolly. Jap was a stringy, gangling man with a bony hard face and craggy jaw. He made no pretense of friendliness,

and it was plain that even common politeness would be lost on him.

"Where's the boss, Kershaw?" Pat queried shortly. Jap glared at him, jaws working. "I know you," he rasped. "You're Stevens. Lazy Horse outfit—or Lazy Man, or somethin'. But *you're* busy enough! Over here spyin' around, ain't *yuh*?"

"If you mean I saw you knock down the boy yonder, yes," Pat grunted.

Jap's gaze turned wary. "What's the game, Stevens? Our fam'ly affairs are none o' yore mix—"

"No." Pat's curt monosyllable was uncompromising. "I was just wonderin' if you act as brave as that away from home."

A furious red tide crawled across Jap's distorted features. "Why, you mouthy, cow-nursin'—" he snarled.

Pat's left hand shot out with pointing finger, directed unerringly at the other. His words, raised scarcely above his normal tone, cracked like a whip.

"Keep your hand away from that gun, Kershaw!"

Jap's glower did not soften in the slightest, but his tense crouch perceptibly relaxed. Something about this cool man baffled him, warning him to go slow.

"What'll *yuh* do, Stevens?" he taunted, to cover his back-down. "Or ain't *yuh* sayin'?"

"Here, here," came a rumbling exclamation from the house. Kyle Kershaw thrust out into the yard bare-headed. "What's all this about, now?"

Pat's silence forced Jap to explain. "We got us a spy," he muttered, jerking a thumb in Pat's direction. "I gave him the tip to move out—"

The rancher took Pat in with a sweep of fierce,

shaggy-browed eyes. The fire died out of his face as he stood. He was a big, broad-shouldered man, apt prototype of Jap's lankiness, with pendulous dewlaps and tousled, gray hair.

"Why, hell! That's Stevens," he growled in his deep, resonant voice. "Are *yuh* plumb crazy, Jap? He's our next-door neighbor!"

"Wal, I don't want 'im nosin' around," Jap snarled. "Neighbor or no neighbor—"

"That'll be enough," Kyle thundered. "Git to work! I've told *yuh* again an' again, I won't stand for *yuh* takin' yore gripes out on anybody that's handy . . . Sorry, Stevens," he turned back to Pat apologetically. "I hope you'll overlook the incivility. Seems I'm unable to guard folks against such treatment—but I cert'nly don't hold with it myself—"

"An' that's why you're where *yuh* are now," Jap flung over his shoulder vindictively, starting away. "Suck around all *yuh* want—but I'm warnin' Stevens of what's comin' his way if *I* catch 'im over here again, with his long nose busy!"

Then he was gone. Kyle spread his horny hands helplessly.

"What kin I say, Stevens—except that he ain't talkin' for me? Will told me *yuh* was nice about the Spring Creek water, an' I want *yuh* to know I feel it. It's a great help just now. What's more, I aim t' be neighborly, an' I hope *yuh*'ll come on over here for a friendly howdy any time *yuh* happen to feel like it!"



3.

"THAT'S FINE." Pat smiled, but his manner was abstracted and he looked away, hesitating slightly. "Kershaw, excuse my curiosity—but maybe yuh wouldn't mind telling me your plans for this place?"

For an instant, Kyle looked blank. "Why—uh—"

"I know you don't expect to beat the same problem that licked Hall," reminded Pat smoothly. "I figure you must've spent some time with that one, before you took this place over."

"Oh, yuh mean about the crick here," Kershaw said. "Sure, I've got that puzzle backed to a standstill, Stevens!" While Will rose and approached to listen, Kyle enthusiastically explained his plan to divert a brisk mountain stream two or three miles above in the hills, so that its waters would flow into the canyon, thus assuring a generous year-round supply. Successfully accomplished, it would accommodate more steers than the Tumbling K expected to run.

Pat shook his head dubiously as he listened. "Sounds like a pretty sizable project to me," he murmured.

"Sure. But I'll lick it, Stevens," Kershaw insisted with conviction. "Ain't no doubt about it."

"Hope you do," Pat seconded, with ready warmth. "It means *I'll* be in a position to move my own stock

down on Spring Creek as usual, soon as my summer range begins to run thin—”

“Of course yuh will,” assured Kyle heartily. “We’re workin’ up there in the hills now, as a matter of fact. I don’t intend t’ avail myself of yore crick water one minute longer than’s absolutely necessary.”

“I notice you’ve got some of your stock down there now,” Pat remarked, watching the other.

“Wal, that was necessary,” replied Kyle defensively. “But it was Jap’s idea—and I sent Will over to see yuh right off. It won’t be for long.”

Will nodded silent agreement with this, watching Pat with a respect tinctured with uneasiness. Jap Kershaw did not again put in an appearance, and the older men talked a few minutes longer before parting.

Turning away, Pat headed straight down the canyon at a leisurely pace. A half-mile below, a clatter sounded from up the slope and Sam Sloan rode out to join him.

“Wal, yuh had yore talk an’ got clear,” he grunted. “Thought for a minute yuh was gonna tangle with that Jap. I had a bead on ‘im all the while. He’d never’ve got his gun out of the leather, even if he tried—”

“I suspected as much. But I don’t believe it was your rifle that slowed him up, Sam,” Pat added dryly.

Sloan snorted. “Oh, I know yuh can get tough in a clutch.” He paused. “Wal. What’s the set-up?”

Pat delayed long before answering. “Kyle and Will Kershaw seem to be on the level,” he said at length. “But something warns me they’re due to strike hard goin’ here in Powder Valley—”

“Uh-uh. An’ it’ll be Jap that starts it,” Sam averred. “Yuh reckon Haley will pin any o’ them jobs in town on him?” he asked.

Pat shrugged. "That remains to be seen . . . I was offered the deputy's star again today," he added irrelevantly.

Sam showed his ragged-fanged grin at that. "Sounds as if Haley meant business," he hazarded. But Pat shook his head.

"It wasn't Brad himself who approached me. Libby rode out to the ranch of her own accord. She seemed mighty anxious."

Sam scratched his head, turning this over. "Like that, huh?" He cocked a shrewd eye at the other. "And are yuh takin' the job after all?"

"No. I refused it."

Pat related how Will Kershaw had arrived to ask for the use of the Spring Creek water while the girl was there. Sam listened to the end, frowning with the intensity of his concentration.

"Supposin' she did get Will's goat by warnin' yuh against trouble there on the creek," he observed shrewdly. "She may have somethin' there."

Stevens's response was deliberate. "I'd never have given my consent to their usin' that water, Sam, if there seemed any reason to suspect I couldn't keep the situation firmly in hand."

They discussed it at length as they rode, taking the trail toward town. Sam was on his way home, and Pat confessed a sudden wish to test the temper of Dutch Springs, following the hotel robbery.

"Haley ain't gettin' far with these stick-ups," Sam remarked sagely. "First real trouble he's had since he got in office—an' now it's comin' at him hand over fist. Yuh figure he'll make any kind of a sheriff, Pat?"

The latter refused to commit himself. "Brad may be

all right, once he shrugs into the harness. For Libby's sake, I hope he does."

"He'll have t' git over that howdy-folks, slap-on-the-back way o' his, then," grunted Sam. "He's been keepin' office hours at the Gold Eagle, instead of the jail-house."

"Oh, I don't know," demurred Pat mildly. "Every man in town seems to think well of Haley—"

"And is that good?" retorted Sam tartly.

Pat chuckled. "It's good politics, anyway. Whether it's calculated to make a man a better law officer, I wouldn't attempt to say."

"Take the badge he's offerin', an' yuh might be able t' help straighten him out," Sam suggested.

Pat refused to make an issue of his refusal, even in conversation, but the other read his ingrained reluctance to tie up with an unknown quantity. Bluff and hail-fellow as Brad Haley seemed, he was new here, untried. In Pat's eyes, regardless of his attractive daughter, he must stand on his own merits, precisely the same as the Kershaws, until he had proved himself.

Arriving in the little cow town an hour later, they rode up its wide street and racked their broncs at the Gold Eagle. Greeting acquaintances, they stepped inside to find Ezra, Sam's lanky, one-eyed partner on the Bar ES horse ranch, engaged in his favorite pursuit at one of the poker tables.

The big redhead dropped out of the game to join them at the bar, and for a time lively and salty banter flew back and forth. Having had their drink, they were moving back outside when they ran into Sheriff Haley himself, a stocky, grave-faced man with twinkling eyes, just in the act of entering the saloon.

"Wal, howdy, Stevens." He turned back, nodding cordially. "Seems I won't be havin' yore help after all, eh? Sorry. Lib told me she had another talk with yuh, and the answer is still no—"

"The answer is still no, Brad. Not that I've a livin' thing against you," replied Pat, faintly surprised on finding the man in town.

"No, that's quite all right." The lawman's bluff manner remained perfectly cheerful, and it was plain that his regret over Pat's decision, if any, was of the slightest. "We all play 'em as we see 'em, boy."

Pat mentioned this morning's robbery at the hotel, across the street. "I take it yuh didn't have any luck with your posse?" he queried frankly.

Haley spread his beefy hands. "Trail petered out on us inside of ten miles," he declared. "Couldn't pick up another trace, Stevens, more's the pity."

"And no idea of who it might've been either, I understand?" Pat pursued easily.

The Sheriff's affable expression turned cagey. "Why, nothin' I'm prepared to make public, anyhow," he evaded. "Yuh know how these things are yoreself."

There followed a few more words concerning this and other robberies. Perfectly outspoken up to a point about every case, Brad could not be induced to divulge his private thoughts on any of them.

"Expect you've heard that Turk Marble's been reported in this country, Haley," Sam Sloan said. He named a notorious outlaw, whose exploits were common knowledge all over the mountain West. Marble's usual haunts included Arizona and New Mexico, and it was seldom that he was reported this far north; but the

long-rider made no bones, on occasion, of a flying trip as far away as Montana. "It'd be like him," Sam pointed out, "t' pick out a quiet range like Powder Valley an' make hisself at home—"

"Pah! Nothin' to it, Sloan." Brad waved away the rumor without hesitation. "Yuh hear the same story after every piece of picayune thievery. Would Turk Marble be interested in—Al Henshaw's cheap hotel, for instance? . . . He's probably ridin' miles away from here."

"Yuh may be right at that." There was craft in Sam's uncertainty of tone. "Mebby there's somebody a whole lot closer you're keepin' an eye on right now—"

"Wal, of course, I'm obliged t' ride herd on the young rips—like them Kershaws, an' others," Haley conceded largely. "That goes on all the time."

"Then yuh think mebby Jap—" began Sam, in a tone of discovery.

But Brad refused to be drawn out thus easily. "Mebby I do," he said doggedly. "Whatever I think, Sloan, I ain't doin' it out loud—and that's how she'll have to lay for now."

Whatever he strove to conceal, it was manifest that he entertained a lively suspicion concerning Jap Kershaw, one which he was not prepared to relinquish till he had further studied the matter.

"Huh! So he ain't talkin'!" Sam muttered disgustedly, after they had taken leave of Haley and were mounting their horses. "Wants us t' think he's workin' real hard on these robberies—in spite of a total lack o' results so far. In my delicate nostrils," he said deliberately, "our hard-ridin' sheriff—stinks."

"Ever happen t' ask him how purty yuh smell t' him?" retorted Ezra.

Pat laughed at them both. "Don't be so hard on the man," he urged mildly. "Depend on it, he's got his headaches just now. In his shoes, you'd be crawlin' out from under, too—"

"Ever see me try t' duck anything like he's doin'?" demanded Sam fiercely.

"Well, I know how fast a talker you can be," drawled Pat—and ducked as Sloan aimed a swing at his head. A moment later Ezra thrust in between them, and Pat was compelled to use sternness to prevent a real scrimmage. Inveterate cronies for many years, neither Ezra nor Sam had ever pulled any punches in their constant bickering, and it was a wonder that no serious injuries had resulted since neither could ever be made to admit himself in the wrong.

"I'll just play truant officer and go along home with you two tonight," Pat told them, with mock severity. "Anythin' to keep the peace. 'Murder on the Bar ES,' is a headline I don't want to read in the Hopewell Junction paper. 'Man slays partner on lonely ranch. 'I did it just to be ornery,'" he tells arresting sheriff.' I can see it now."

The pair glared in exasperation, only to break into grins finally. The Bar ES lay south a number of miles, at the lower end of the valley, a chinkless log cabin crouching under cottonwoods, and the partners were secretly delighted to entertain Stevens, if only overnight.

During the evening, Pat found indirect means of learning whether the old rawhides had observed any

strangers riding across the range within the past couple of weeks. Sam Sloan, at least, caught the drift of his curiosity and his response was prompt.

"If yuh mean them four hombres that rode across yore lower range this mornin'," he said pointedly, "I kin tell yuh where they went—"

Pat's glance dwelt on him steadily. "Why, it might help to know," he allowed quietly.

"They drilled on toward Kershaw's Tumblin' K," Sam said, "an' split up somewheres close by. I was tryin' t' trail one of 'em when I run into you."

Pat thought that over. He had expected something of the kind. "It seemed kind of funny that Sheriff Haley should lose their sign so soon," he mused. "If they split up, that could account for it."

"Yeah? . . . They still had t' go somewheres," Sam pressed him shrewdly. "Where'd they go?"

"That," Pat put him off blandly, perfectly aware of what he meant, "is anybody's guess."

Work on the Bar ES at the present season was at a standstill. In the morning, Ezra and Sam saddled up and rode back to town with Stevens. And having once arrived there, they were in no hurry to part. They were still hobnobbing an hour after midday when, at Sloan's suggestion, they moved down toward the post-office in Jeb Winters's general store.

Pat, in the lead, was stepping in at the door when a heavy-set man, in the act of coming out, barged into him full-tilt. The other actually stepped on his foot, slamming his thick-sinewed weight against Pat with a jarring impact. A lighter man would have been flung sprawling, but Pat froze in his tracks, solid as a stone

wall, and it was the other who caromed backward, affecting startled surprise, though the sharp flick of his eyes said that he was far from flustered.

"Holy smoke! My mistake, friend," he jerked out in a grunt, and then paused. "Oh, is it you, Stevens? . . . Thought I seen you down the street a couple hours ago."

Pat's answering smile was faint. "Wouldn't wonder if you did, Dude. Reckon we were both clumsy that time," was the extent of his own apology for the collision.

"Must be raisin' some mighty fine stock out there on the Lazy Mare, if they're carryin' as much solid beef on their bones as you got."

Winking at Ezra and Sam, Dude Buell appeared perfectly good-humored. But Pat had not missed his unguarded remark, indicating his surprise that Stevens should still be lingering in town. It was even possible to read a faint trace of annoyance in the knowledge.

A cattleman and businessman around Powder Valley for several years past, Buell of late had commenced to acquire extensive interests and as a consequence was something of an influential figure. Pat had never taken to him because Dude ran a gambling-house, as a side line, at the other end of town. If no particular stigma attached to the occupation, it at least argued that Buell was in the habit of keeping the wrong kind of company.

This was the first time an inkling had ever reached Pat that Buell might have the remotest interest in his movements. There was little doubt in his mind, moreover, that their colliding in the doorway had been deliberate on Dude's part. The idea interested him not a

little. On the point of departing presently for the Lazy Mare, he changed his mind now, deciding to remain a while longer for what it might be worth.

The partners found no quarrel with this, always ready to waste time with him at the slightest excuse, or with none. Today Stevens trailed along wherever they led, not neglecting to keep a fairly close eye on the activities of this town.

Supertime passed without event. But almost immediately afterward, an uproar issuing from the Gold Eagle drew the trio that way. Men began to appear hastily from every quarter of Dutch Springs, sensing excitement. Pat and his companions shoved through the men at the door and entered the saloon.

They saw at once that a particularly rough fight was in boisterous progress. Pat was not surprised to note that it was Jap Kershaw who had tangled with a *Slash V* puncher. Both a little the worse for liquor, they swung wildly, knocked each other down repeatedly, and even rolled under the tables, kicking and gouging. The bartender, rushing out to interfere, bungstarter in hand, soon learned his mistake and crawled away with a battered head. Cowboys and saloon habitués dodged about, calling advice or encouragement to the antagonists.

The row drew to an abrupt close when Kershaw's foe collapsed in a limp heap, knocked cold by a lucky roundhouse. And none too soon for Jap, who was able to swing around in time to face Sheriff Haley, shoving into the place at the moment.

"Wal, Kershaw," Brad rasped half-humorously, conscious of his audience. "Finished yore work, have yuh?"

Jap glowered at him venomously, swaying in his tracks, chest heaving. "Stand away from the door," he warned. "Or yuh'll find out I haven't—"

Brad did not fall in with his wishes at once, playing a cat-and-mouse game. "Why shouldn't I haul yuh in for creatin' a disturbance here in town?" he demanded challengingly.

They sparred a minute or two longer, interested listeners following the exchange with close attention. Aware already, however, that it would come to nothing more than words, Pat turned away.

He was making for a quiet corner of the place when Ezra's unobtrusive thumb jabbed him in the ribs. Lips closed in a thin line, the big fellow jerked his head slightly toward the street. Changing direction without comment, Pat shouldered his way to the door and went out. With Sam at their heels, he and Ezra moved toward a spot where they might converse unobserved.

"Well," Pat murmured finally, halting. "What's biting yuh all of a sudden, Ez?"

The one-eyed giant pinned him with a glance. "It's mighty plain yuh didn't spot the same hombre I did, siftin' around through that crowd—" he retorted significantly.

"Guess not." Pat smiled. "Was it Jesse James—or Napoleon?"

Ezra shook his head stubbornly. "I *think* it was Shoshone Thompson," he said dourly. "He was sure sly an' quiet, not callin' no attention to hisself. But if I'm right, Brad Haley would've been makin' a great mistake to get rough with Jap Kershaw, 'long about that time!"

4.

“SHOSHONE THOMPSON, eh?” Pat’s gravity of tone attested the importance which he attributed to that name. “You didn’t see Marble himself—or any of the rest of his crowd?”

“No. But I know Shoshone well ‘nough to be fairly certain,” Ez declared. “An’ whenever he shows up, yuh can be sure Turk an’ the boys ain’t far away.”

The three exchanged glances of silent surmise. “Yuh reckon that spells more dirty work in the makin’, Pat?” inquired Sloan. “Turk Marble ain’t famous for wastin’ his time in any man’s town—”

“What became of Thompson?” Pat asked his lanky friend.

Ezra shrugged. “Last I seen of ‘im was his back,” he responded. “I didn’t aim t’ call his attention to myself by follerin’ him.”

Stevens thought briefly. “Maybe it would be a good scheme to have our look around.”

They strolled the length of the street, unobtrusively scanning every face in sight, but not for an instant did any of them glimpse the man they sought. As for the rest of Marble’s outlaw gang, they might never have stepped foot in Dutch Springs for all the evidence there was of them now.

Far from reassured, Ezra and Sam thought the circumstance decidedly ominous. "If Shoshone was casin' the town," remarked the latter, "the rest'll be sure t' keep well out o' sight till it's time t' go into action."

Pat neglected to commit himself to an opinion. But he thought the situation sufficiently interesting to allow of further investigation.

"Would it do any good to tip Haley off t' keep an eye open?" inquired Sam, his brows corrugated with concern.

Ezra hooted at that. "Brad didn't git t' be a big bad sheriff by takin' stock in other people's guesses," he pointed out. "Yuh heard what he said about Marble. Take his word for it that Turk's ridin' far from here. That settled it for Haley!"

It was true. Sheriff Haley was unlikely to give any credence even to circumstantial evidence, bound as he now was to back his own stand. The three were still guardedly talking it over when Pat pulled his hat off to greet Haley's daughter, passing down the street.

"Howdy, ma'am," he smiled, while his companions followed suit with their usual abashed grins. "You seem to be in the pink, this evening—"

Libby's answering smile was almost forlorn. "My appearance sadly belies my state of mind, then," she confessed.

Even the most obtuse could scarcely have failed to note that she was strangely uneasy about something. Pat's easy jocularity dropped from him. "What would be troublin' yuh now, Miss Haley?"

"You must call me Libby," she reproved, "if I am expected to return the compliment . . . But must I

explain, Pat? These robberies have drawn men into town in far greater numbers than usual. There've been fights. I feel a threat in the very air—”

“Folks *are* uncommonly stirred up, for a fact,” assented Pat. “But that'll blow over. Your dad has only to keep his head.”

“I'm afraid his hand may be forced,” Libby interposed, all too plainly.

Pat weighed this, slowly judging its import. He was about to reply when the girl started forward impulsively. She had caught sight of Will Kershaw, striding up the boardwalk, and her action claimed his attention at once. If he noted the color mantling her brow, he placed his own interpretation on its true meaning.

“Will—” she began uncertainly, stepping back as he turned toward her boldly. “Pardon me, but you must believe my present intentions are only for your good . . . May I offer you some—excellent advice?”

“What would that be?” demanded young Kershaw rather warily, in a skeptical voice.

“Will, I wish you would ride home at once,” she hurried on. “Will you do that—just for tonight?”

Will only scrutinized her suspiciously while Pat and the partners stood politely aside, following this exchange. Stevens was once more struck with the young fellow's remarkable resemblance to himself at an earlier age and could have kicked him for his ungraciousness to the girl.

“Why should I do that?” the young fellow got out, flatly.

Libby's distress must have been all too plain, even to him. “You probably wouldn't understand,” she burst

out. "But—your brother has already been in a brawl today. There's talk against your people. Won't you *please* keep out of sight and give this a chance to die down, before—"

Any suggestion that the Kershaw reputation might be questioned only turned Will against her like iron. Absurdly sensitive on the subject as he was, it would have done no good to suggest that he was being unreasonable as well.

"Well, now!" There was considerable sarcasm in his manner. "Some more of your old man's work, no doubt! Yuh might tell Mister Sheriff Haley to mend his own fences, and meanwhile we'll look after ourselves."

"Will, please don't misunderstand me—" she began, with plucky self-control, although her face was aflame. But he had already swung on his heel and stalked away.

Libby turned almost pleadingly to Pat. "Why *won't* he listen to reason?" she exclaimed, in despair. "My simple request seems little enough to ask—"

"Why, Libby, your being Brad Haley's girl is already two strikes against you, in young Kershaw's eyes," explained Pat mildly. "I've little doubt he'll think it over, when he calms down, and end up by followin' your good advice . . . But if it'll ease your mind any, Ezra here'll be glad to keep an eye on the boy. Won't you, Ez?"

Ezra's assent was not delayed. He had early taken a shine to the girl, in defiance of his dubious opinion of her father, and was not above showing it in any small way within his power.

"I'll take the young scamp by the scruff o' the neck, if yuh say so, an' drag 'im home pronto," he offered.

Libby's dismay at this drastic proposal was patent. But Pat laughed it off. "Just keep an eye on him," he advised, dryly. "I'll venture to predict it won't be for long. Will's got a fund of common sense under his crust, unless I'm pretty much mistaken."

Jerking a nod, Ezra strolled off in the wake of the headstrong young fellow and presently disappeared. Libby dropped a hand briefly on Pat's arm, a touch light as a feather.

"Thank you, Pat," she said. "I feel responsible for Will in a way, after unintentionally incurring his indignation at the Lazy Mare."

"Sure, I know." Pat chuckled mischievously. "We all feel a purely impersonal concern toward him—"

Effectively routed by this thrust, which came far closer to the truth than she had any intention of admitting, a slight flush staining her cheeks, Libby went on her way rather abruptly, without attempting a retort.

Left to themselves, Pat and Sam spent an hour in seemingly casual inspection of events, without observing anything to arouse their curiosity. At dark they retired to the Gold Eagle, to visit a few minutes with Ab Keeler, the banker. Pat later found an unusual amusement, for him, in watching a poker game and taking no notice of Dude Buell, glancing across the table at him with enigmatic persistence. Whatever the reason which lay in the back of his crafty head, Buell was plainly unable to conceal his uneasiness at Pat's continued presence in town. Trained as he was to take note of the unusual, Stevens had as yet found no plain pattern underlying the odd experiences of the past

couple of days; but the impression that one existed was sufficiently strong to keep all his faculties on the alert.

The evening wore away innocuously enough, Ezra failing to put in an appearance. Pat and Sam were seated on the hotel steps, at a late hour, having concluded that nothing impended for what remained of this night, when a clatter of hoofs sounded up the street.

Pat rose to his feet for a better look, and a gangling rider astride a nervous horse loomed through the moonless obscurity, hauling in sharply a dozen paces away. It proved to be Kyle Kershaw.

"That you, Stevens?" he accosted gruffly. "Ain't seen nothin' o' my boys, have yuh—?"

"Why, Jap was pretty much in evidence earlier in the evening," was the moderate reply. "Wouldn't be such a bad idea to persuade *him* to go along home with you, Kershaw," Pat added pointedly.

"No—it's Will I'm huntin' right now," returned Kyle shortly.

The announcement considerably surprised Pat, and he showed it. "Shucks, Kershaw! That boy can pretty much take care of himself . . . In fact, Will did show up around suppertime, and Libby Haley was a little worried about him. But he disappeared right off—"

"Lib Haley? Yuh mean Brad's girl?" Kyle was briefly nonplused, failing to perceive the connection. "Will don't even know her—"

"They're acquainted—if that's what yuh mean," Pat assured him. "I wouldn't say it goes any further with Will."

"But yuh mean it does with her?" the rancher interposed, gruffly.

"Be a good plan to leave that to them, wouldn't it?" observed Pat.

Kyle's grunt was noncommittal. "Right now I wanna see that boy personal," he growled. "I'll have my look around."

"Danged if he don't act kind of anxious about it," muttered Sam, as they watched Kershaw drift down the street. "Wonder if Will's got hisself tangled in somethin'?"

"Either that, or Kyle's afraid he might land there," was the reserved reply.

They were still lounging in front of the hotel an hour later when Kershaw returned. "No luck, eh?" Pat called to him.

"Naw—" Kyle expressed himself vigorously concerning his utter lack of success. "If the kid *was* in town, he's pulled out long since. But where in hell'd he go?" the man fumed, sadly puzzled over the problem.

"Why, home I suppose—where he belongs," Pat tossed back. "He's probably there now, wonderin' where you are."

Kyle shoved on a moment later, muttering to himself. Sam passed the subject off, after some brief speculation; but Pat could not help asking himself the true source of Kyle Kershaw's manifest concern over a son of Will's age.

Yawning and stretching, Sam broke a thoughtful silence with exasperated impatience. "Hell, what're we settin' here for, doin' Brad Haley's worryin' at this ungodly hour?" he groused, struggling to his feet. "Let's hit the soogans, Stevens—unless you're fed up with sleepin' in a stable mow?"

Pat's headshake was minute. "We'll give Al Henshew our business," he murmured. "Not that I expect we'll see or overhear anything in the hotel—"

"But yuh don't believe in overlookin' a chance. Is that it?"

They moved inside and selected a room-key in the empty office, after the informal manner of the place. Not even the recent robbery had power to change the custom of long-standing laxness practiced by the proprietor.

Late as the hour was, Dutch Springs had grown as quiet as it ever got, and the two were not long in drifting off to sleep. Nor did the movements of the other guests disturb their rest in the slightest. They were still dead to the world the following morning, when the pop of a gunshot, echoing from the street, brought both their heads above the blankets in a trice.

Sunshine was already streaming in the window, and it was clear they had slept on past their usual hour. "Cripes! Must be eight o'clock at least," groaned Sam, yawning and stretching preparatory to hopping out of bed.

Hard on the words, a second gunshot racketed beyond the open window. Both stiffened. Occasional gunfire in town was nothing unusual; but this seemed suddenly different. An instant later, hearing an alarmed yell outside, they were sure of it.

Pat sprang to the window, almost knocking his stocky friend down. Together they leaned out for a look. The action was disconcertingly accompanied by a bang from down-street, and a wild slug raked along the hotel front, perilously close to their heads. With-

drawing hastily, Pat glanced across at the Gold Eagle. Kize Wagner, an old friend, was standing just inside the door. He had his gun in his hand.

"What's up, Kize?" Pat yelled down to him.

Wagner cocked a bushy brow upward. "All hell in a hand basket," he called back, with gruff calm. "They're stickin' up the bank, Stevens—"

Pat waited for no more. The effrontery of it was sublime, coming on the heels of recent robberies as it did; but there was no time now for any extended consideration of outlaw ethics. He beat Sam into boots and pants by several seconds, and whipped his gunbelt around his waist as he bounded down the stairs, with Sloan at his heels.

Men were beginning to gather in the hotel office, armed but directionless in the absence of some guiding spirit.

"Well!" Pat rapped at them. "What are you birds standin' there for? Where are those hombres—or don't yuh know?"

"They're in the bank now, Stevens!" a nervous cow-punch returned. "Must be six or seven of 'em! They got a guard posted, an' he's smokin' the street!"

"Fine," Pat grunted. "Then we'll bottle 'em right where they are—"

A murmur of doubt arose at this bold proposal. "Yuh mean yuh'll tackle that crowd cold, Stevens?" a man demurred uneasily. "They're dynamite!"

Pat's glance was cold. "Did you think I ain't?" he retorted flatly. "They'll either give up, or we'll be stickin' a posy in their hands!"

There was a momentary hesitation, but they followed

him through to the rear and emerged in the back yard of the hotel. Not all the Dutch Springs townsmen were as backward as this bunch; every moment or two, a perfect gale of gunfire pounded from the main street. Breaking into a run, with Sloan at his heels, Stevens led the way past the backs of several stores and business places, and presently approached the rear bank corner.

Angry slugs screamed off the corner of the brick building as they paused there. Someone was bitterly determined to prevent them from breaking into the open. Pat looked across the alley speculatively. A puncher noted his glance.

"Don't yuh try it, Stevens!" he warned. "Yuh'll be blasted down before yuh take ten steps—"

Pat was afraid he was right. But some means must be hastily devised of disposing of that trigger-happy guard posted out there in the street. He whirled back.

"Climb up on the roof of Skinner's shed, Sam," he directed swiftly. "Crawl to the front, an' yuh can drop that fellow before he so much as suspects you're there."

Eager hands were helping Sloan to scramble up to the roof when a racket of guns sounded from the front of the bank. Pat guessed its meaning in a flash.

"Too late," he called. "They're pullin' out of the bank! Maybe we can down a couple while they're getting to their horses!"

With reckless disregard of danger, he burst round the bank corner, making for the front. He had guessed correctly. Even as he swept the street with his glance, four men were to be seen boldly swinging aboard the mettlesome broncs waiting in front of the place.

Guns were slamming at them now from almost every

quarter. Their own Colts were out and spitting; but in the heat of the getaway, they found so many targets as men strove determinedly to close in on them that they wasted little time in aiming. The same appeared true of the angry and excited townsmen; for while his hat sailed off one of the outlaws as he sat his saddle, none of the others appeared to be hit, and they all held their seats without effort.

They were cool enough. Three were astride already, prancing their mounts to present as difficult a mark as possible. But they stubbornly waited for the fourth member of the gang, whose frightened horse was giving him trouble.

Pat snapped a shot at the man and saw the heel fly off one of his boots as if by magic. A slug had grazed Pat's hip just as he fired, making him flinch involuntarily. He tried again.

But the fourth man was up at last. Wheeling his pony, a rangy black, he gave a throaty rebel yell and sank his spurs deep.

In a close group, the outlaws swept down the street, their guns blazing. At the corner of almost every building they encountered a hot fire. But almost miraculous as it seemed, they rode unscathed. No one swung astride saddles to take up the pursuit, and Pat abruptly noted the unusual absence of horses along the racks. It seemed almost prearranged, and certainly could not have fallen out to greater advantage for the outlaws.

A moment later, the four reached the edge of town, horses racing in flight, and faded from view past the last fringe of sheds.

5.

WITH SHREWD JUDGMENT of where the hottest news could be picked up, Pat headed straight for the bank door. A number of others were converging there as well, the group including Ab Keeler, president of the institution, Sheriff Haley, and several prominent merchants who could be depended upon to see at once what this event might mean to themselves.

"No—I was a few minutes late gettin' in this mornin'," Pat heard Keeler explaining wheezily to the Sheriff. Ab was stout and aging, and he couldn't stand much excitement. "They must've struck on the dot of eight o'clock—"

All paused as Art Bickle, the cashier, appeared in the doorway. He was a wiry, thin-faced man, just now in his shirtsleeves and wearing the black wrist-guards of an accountant. There was a worried harassment in his shifting eyes.

"What's the story, Bickle?" Haley demanded officially.

Bickle's expression grew dour. "Short and sweet, Brad," he muttered. "They appear to have taken us for just about all our loose currency—"

Haley glared at him. "Yuh mean they walked in on yuh and cleaned the place?"

"No—they must've broken in sometime during the early morning. . . . I *seen* those broncs outside, but I didn't tumble. Everything appeared to be normal. I unlocked the door and stepped in—and first thing I knew, there was a gun stuck in my ribs."

"Yuh mean they were waitin' for yuh—*inside*?" Haley barked.

"That's the size of it. A look around will probably turn up a busted back-window . . . I didn't have no choice, Haley. I was ordered to open the vault pronto—and with that gun winkin' at me, I did as I was told."

"Recognize any of 'em, Art?" a new voice struck in, pointedly. It was Dude Buell, a regular depositor.

Bickle hesitated, then shook his head. "I couldn't be sure," he murmured. "Yuh must've seen they was all masked—and, I realize now, I was too damned mad to look 'em over right careful."

His talk made sense. And yet, there was something here that warned Pat to take special note of this scene—something on which he was unable immediately to put his finger. He compromised by paying close attention to what was said.

"Wal—have yuh been in the vault yet yoreself, Art?" Ab Keeler demanded, beginning to get red about the gills.

"I have, Mr. Keeler," was the grim response. "As near as I could tell by a hasty check, we've lost somewhere in the neighborhood of eighteen thousand dollars!"

Ab groaned, his features swelling till he looked on the verge of a stroke.

"Well, are yuh aimin' t' *do* somethin', Haley?" he hurled at the lawman, in a shrill squeak.

"Don't fret. I'll do plenty!" retorted Brad. To do him credit, his expression of indignation was savage as he darted sharp looks about, taking note of who was standing here. "We'll be throwin' a posse together in short order—"

"I stand ready to ride with yuh," Dude Buell spoke up at once. "What's more, I think I can offer a hot tip on where to head."

"Where would that be?" Impatient of advice as he appeared, Haley did not attempt to avoid this talk. "Yuh sound as if yuh had a pretty good idea who's behind this rotten business, Buell."

"Sure I have! It was those Kershaws," Dude tossed back coolly. "Every one of 'em was in town last night, if you'll remember. At least, *I* noticed it—"

Pat's mouth drew thin and straight at this. He slanted a glance at Sam, nodding slightly, and the stocky little man slipped away without comment. Pat turned back to follow the quick exchange of talk, in which the fate of an entire family was being cursorily decided.

"Would you swear yuh reco'nized any of the Kershaws just now—while they was pullin' away?" Jeb Winters, the merchant, demanded tersely.

Buell shrugged. "Wal, they had old duds on, of course." He fended the pointed query aside, contemptuously. "But search the old Hall place a couple of hours from now," he thrust on bluntly, "and just see whether yuh find that money or not!"

Pat had not spoken a word as yet; but observing that Dude was carrying at least a part of the gathering with him in his obviously unfounded accusation, he deemed it advisable to insert a toneless remark, directed as much as anything to Sheriff Haley.

"You *might* all just wait till you see where the tracks of that gang lead, seems to me," he let drop.

"Meanin' you disagree with me, eh, Stevens?" Dude caught him up, bristling.

Pat frankly declined a controversy on the subject. "It could prove that you were right, Buell," he drawled thinly. "But look at it another way . . . If it just happened you *were* wrong, it'd be too late—for the Kershaws, wouldn't it? You'd have succeeded in slappin' the outlaw brand on 'em, regardless of whether they deserved it."

"And do you think they don't?" Dude whipped over.

Pat's shoulders lifted and dropped. "I'm ready to accept the outcome, whatever it is," he retorted firmly.

Sheriff Haley had been busy dispatching a number of men after horses while this talk went on. He turned to Pat now, his glance blandly inscrutable.

"We'll follow yore suggestion, Stevens, soon as the boys get the broncs up," he nodded. "Too bad yuh won't be goin' along!"

Pointedly as it was said, it seemed a direct reference to Pat's recent refusal of a deputy's authority. Brad appeared almost to find satisfaction, now, in the fact that this was so.

If he thought that settled the matter, Pat surprised him with his instant response.

"Give me full charge of that posse," the latter coolly stipulated, "and I'll be along, Haley—and come pretty close to guaranteein' results!"

Arrested, Brad stared at him for an instant in silence. Only Dude Buell appeared to find the sudden proposal unwelcome. Himself already self-selected a member of the posse, he started to scoff at Pat.

Ab Keeler quickly forestalled him, however. "There yuh are, Haley," he exclaimed. "Close with his offer! Yuh've known Stevens only a few months, and I've known him as many years. I happen t' know what he can do!"

The added urgings of Jeb Winters and one or two others decided Haley. As if wary of any appearance of having his hand forced, he quickly nodded assent.

"You're on, Stevens," he said curtly. "I'll swear yuh in, an' yuh can get started right off. I see the boys're about ready—"

"Won't yuh be goin' along, Haley?" demanded Sam Sloan, striding up at that moment with his and Pat's horses, which he had saddled in record time.

Brad's ordinarily good-humored eyes narrowed sharply. "Stow the advice," he growled. "Stevens has his authority as my rep now. He'll be there—while I'm busy checkin' matters at this end."

Even Pat was faintly surprised by this way of looking at the thing, but only momentarily. It looked uncommonly like Haley's smooth attempt to put him on the spot. At the same time it suited Pat's book entirely to be given an absolutely free hand. He signed to Sam to drop that line of inquiry, and the little man smoothed a scowl off his blue-stubbled visage.

Shoving the deputy's badge into his pocket, Stevens ticked off the men he wanted to ride with him. Sam was one; nor did Pat make any fuss about including Dude Buell. It had occurred to him more than once that it might prove interesting to study that individual closely for an uninterrupted period, and this might well be his chance.

They pulled out five minutes later, all mounted on

fast horses and heavily armed. For a mile or so there was no difficulty about trailing the bandits, who had driven west across the range at a breakneck pace, without any consideration other than placing distance behind them.

Another mile, and the tracks they were following dipped down toward a cottonwood-lined creek meandering across their path. Pat was in the lead, and the others hung back to give him a chance as he followed the gouged hoof-marks down the steep bank. All but Dude Buell, who plunged recklessly on at one side.

"Take it easy there, Buell," Sloan called to him shortly. "No tellin' if we'll be able t' foller them tracks on acrost here or not—"

Dude paid no attention, splashing into the creek and nosing about after the fashion of an alert beagle.

Pat saw that the tracks did indeed lead down into the water, without emerging on the far side. He paused.

"Well, Dude." His tone was cutting, for the other was roiling up the water at a great rate. "See anything?"

"Not yet," Buell tossed back off-handedly. "But at least I'm lookin'."

"With yore elbows," Sloan muttered disparagingly. But Stevens ignored the remark.

"How about givin' me a chance?"

Dude glared at him wolfishly, the drawled query carrying the flick of a whiplash. "Hell, Stevens! I'm only tryin' to help," he jerked out.

"Then you're goin' about it the wrong way."

Buell attempted to give him an argument, which could come to nothing. Pat cut him off with an increase of sharpness.

"Wouldn't want us to think you were aimin' to delay us, would you, Dude?" he inquired softly.

But Buell was not the kind to retire in sulks, even in defeat. "Dammit, what's eatin' you all?" he rasped, in hot exasperation. "It's plain to me the Ker—uh, them owlhoots are usin' this crick to throw us off the scent. They turned down or up, one of the two. What're we waitin' for?"

Pat was watching him with steady gaze. "Maybe you'd like to take two or three of the boys and follow the creek down a mile or so," he proposed smoothly.

Dude stared, caught. "And what'll you be doin'?" he countered sharply.

Pat made a disgusted gesture. "It was my impression that *I'm* runnin' this posse, Buell," he snapped, losing patience at last. "Or do you see it different?"

Cornered, Dude could only give over with a great show of discontent. "Okay!" he conceded, with exaggerated disinterest. "You name it, Stevens, and we'll do it. Only make up yore mind, will yuh?"

He was all for haste now, and Pat flicked a significant glance toward Sam.

"Glad you look at it that way," he nodded unemotionally. "We'll glance over the banks along here for a hundred yards, just to play safe—"

It was done in a jiffy. The possemen reported no further sign of the tracks they had lost.

Pat grunted without change of expression. "All right," he said. "We'll drop the bird-doggin' and get the horses to work—"

"Say about to'lds Sunrise Pass, maybe?" Sam Sloan inserted, shrewdly.

Pat's reply was an untroubled nod. "That'll be a good guess—if we don't waste time getting there," he added briefly.

Dude Buell stared at the pair incredulously. "Yuh mean you're droppin' this hot trail, Stevens—to hit for a pass ten miles away in the hills?"

"That's right." Pat was silkily pleasant. "Comin' along, Dude?"

Buell spread his hands in capitulation. But his smug expression promised that he would have plenty to say, once Stevens's crazy project had proved futile.

Giving over any further thought of reading sign, Pat struck off across the range straight toward the rising hills. He did not head directly for Sunrise Pass, a high notch in the first range of the Culebras, opening upon square miles of virgin wilderness beyond. Bearing somewhat north, he struck into Bear Canyon and led the posse into the lifting hills at a steady, driving pace.

"Goin' out of yore way, ain't yuh?" Buell was driven finally to express a half-sneering opinion.

"Right again," Pat agreed readily. "But you can safely leave that to me, Dude. Just be ready for action when the time comes—"

"If it ever does," Dude could not help adding, in a disparaging tone.

Pat winked at Sam, not troubling himself to retort. He was content that Buell should endeavor to impress the rest of the posse, so long as he kept in line.

Heading Bear Canyon, they found themselves high among the pine-clad shoulders. And now the wisdom of Pat's course was evident. Sunrise Pass lay scarcely three miles away, still higher, but possible to reach by riding the spines which connected these lofty ridges.

Half an hour later they drew near the pass, at a time when even the stubborn Buell could not help noting that the sun lay still on the happy side of meridian. But Sam was not above rubbing it in a little.

"Three hours—roughly," he computed their time from leaving Dutch Springs. "If them owlhoots make it by noon, they'll be doin' good." His glance touched Buell casually, and Dude promptly fired up.

"So you're pretty smart—you and that high-class deputy," he snarled. "But yuh have yet to make sure whether Kershaw will be comin' this way at all!"

Pat eyed him levelly. "Keep it up, Dude," he murmured. "Nobody's named the Kershaws yet but yourself—but that don't matter. Just don't be too disappointed if it should turn out there's not a Kershaw amongst that crowd."

"It's still a big question if we'll ever find out who any of 'em are," Buell exclaimed flatly.

The exchange ended on that note, for Pat was little inclined to argue further with the man. He saw to it that the posse clung to cover as they approached the pass. A few minutes later they rode through the rocky defile, splitting the loftier peaks like an axe stroke.

It was easy to comprehend why outlaws might head for this point. Once through the gateway, a wild expanse of forest and canyon fastness lay open to their choice, a tract in which a hundred men might effectually lose themselves. Pat disposed his men about the tumbled rocks, cautioning them against hasty action, and he and Sam walked back to the gut of the pass, after caching their horses in a thick fir clump.

Looking down the tumbled shoulders to the east, they could see Powder Valley lying outspread below, a

rich kingdom of grazing land. Far out, the plains rose like a wall to meet the horizon; but they found little time for scenery, grand as it was, their slitted gaze busily scanning the slopes immediately below.

They could see nothing, the pine ridges tumbling downward in successive waves, empty of life. Then Sam saw a deer flitting silently through the shadow patterns of the pines, and Pat watched a coyote slink along a bare slope beyond which antelope were grazing. The trails themselves lay silent and deserted, however.

"Yuh reckon we could've slipped in figurin' this?" Sloan queried guardedly.

Pat smiled. His tone was serene. "I don't think so, Sam. But if we did—that's that. It's still a good try."

Crouched behind rocks, they kept their lonely vigil for another half-hour. The possemen by this time were moving restlessly about, and Sloan was on the point of venting his impatient disappointment when Pat abruptly held up a warning hand. They listened.

A faint crashing drifted up to them from far below. Someone was coming this way. Quickly alerting the posse, Pat crawled to a rock nearer the trail, Sam taking up a position on the other side. Drawing their guns, they crouched down.

After a long wait the noise of travel drew nearer. They could catch the gruff exchange of men in conversation. This stopped, and they heard the thud and click of hoofs. Pat and his pudgy friend melted almost into the ground. On came the horsemen, nearer now, their actions proclaiming that they sensed nothing unusual.

As they passed in single file, Pat stole a peep, and his nerves went cold and taut. There could be little

doubt that these were indeed the outlaws, walking unwarily into the trap prepared for them. Pat would have liked to study Dude Buell's face at the moment.

The weary climbers drove on, riding into the throat of the pass. Suddenly there came a shout. One of the possemen had showed himself—probably Buell. A gunshot rang out, followed by several. Pat and Sam sprang to their feet, making for the narrow defile. They were in time to see the outlaws wheel wildly back from the converging posse and race this way.

Pat triggered a shot that brought them to a halt, suddenly realizing their dilemma. He recognized the dark-visaged outlaw who went by the name of Turk Marble; and behind him could be seen the long, lanky form of Shoshone Thompson. Their guns were out, but they wisely refrained from firing, hemmed in inescapably, front and back, as they were.

"Give it up, Marble!" Pat called out from behind his rock, his Colt trained squarely on the outlaw leader. "I don't want to cut yuh down unless I'm forced to. You'll get your everlastin', every one of yuh, before yuh get away!"

Turk glowered his hatred and despair for a heavy moment. His gun thudded to the dust then, and his companions followed his example.

6.

LED BY ONE or two hotheads, the possemen closed in determinedly on Marble and his companions as if anxious to drag them out of the saddle on the spot.

“Take it easy, Buell,” Pat heard one of the other men exclaim gruffly, in an injured tone.

“Why should I? I aim to get at those boys and lay hand on that bank money,” Dude threw out grimly, forcing his horse forward.

“Well, yuh don’t have t’ knock *me* down doin’ it!” was the wrathy reply.

Buell had already reached Shoshone Thompson’s side and was roughly going through his clothes and saddle pockets.

“How about checkin’ the three of ‘em first for extra guns,” Pat threw in coldly, his eyes taking in Buell’s every move with canny attention.

Dude said nothing, but his search became more thorough. He gave vent to his exasperation in a disappointed snarl, as none of the bank loot came to light.

“Thompson’s clean,” he burst out. “Must be Marble who’s carryin’ the stuff—”

Before he could make a move, Pat signed to the outlaw chief to step down. Turk complied with an ill grace.

“Never met you b’fore,” he growled, staring fixedly.

"Stevens, they're callin' yuh. What's the meanin' of this stick-up, anyhow?"

Pat passed over the lame attempt at professed ignorance in silence. He slapped Marble's clothes investigatively, finding neither concealed guns nor any suspicious lump that might prove to be hidden currency.

"What did you do with it, Marble?" he inquired pleasantly, turning his attention to the man's saddle trappings without any better results. "Your other friend isn't packing it, by any chance?"

"Who—Keno?" retorted Turk, unguardedly. "Search him, friend, if yuh think you'll find—whatever it is you're lookin' for."

Pat's lips were a thin straight line. "We will," he nodded, half-humorously. "Not that I expect to locate —whatever it is I'm lookin' for."

Keno, the third outlaw, was rather hastily gone through without any of the missing bank money putting in an appearance. It was plain enough that, whatever had happened, these three were not now carrying any of the booty.

"Have a good look, Stevens," exploded Dude Buell. "You may be able to learn just where yore fine scheme missed fire—"

A shade nonplussed by this newest development, Pat paused to glance at him inquiringly.

"There were four men in that crowd when it hit the bank," Buell pointed out with hard intent. "Maybe yuh can persuade Marble to tell yuh where the missing man dropped out—packin' the gravy with him!"

Pat's glance switched to the scowling outlaw. "What about that, Turk?" he asked conversationally.

But Marble was not going to be of any help. "I don't

know what you're all talkin' about," he muttered flatly. "Me and my friends was ridin' up the trail when yuh jumped us. That's all I know!"

Taking a step forward, Pat drew a black cloth mask out of Marble's saddle pocket, where he had run across it moments before, and looked at it significantly. "Haven't the slightest idea where this thing came from, I don't suppose—or what it might be used for, either?" he smiled.

"Oh hell, Stevens!" Buell flung at him vituperatively. "Don't be hagglin' with the man over somethin' yuh both know perfectly well! . . . What happened is plain enough. By dodgin' around them back trails, yuh let Jap Kershaw slip through with the money! Talk all yuh want, but yuh ain't coverin' that fact up with us!"

Pat was still studying Marble speculatively. "What *did* become of your fourth man, Turk?" he asked softly. "Didn't get a saddle sliver in him, did he, and drop out to—rest?"

"Jap didn't never!" the outlaw spat forth vehemently. "I mean, Kershaw wa'n't with us at all! Furthermore, Stevens, not a one of us stuffed a nickel of bank money in our pants today! Like it or not, that's gospel."

"Oh, sure. And what's more, it's a triple-stitched, copper-riveted alibi, too—not to call it downright malarkey," sneered Buell heavily, glaring first at Marble, and then toward Pat, with undisguised fury.

Curiously enough, Pat was inclined to believe the outlaw. But all his attention was taken up at the moment with an attentive contemplation of Buell. Dude's wrath seemed, in fact, so effectively pumped up that

Pat could not help noticing the fact. His next words appeared curiously disconnected with what had gone before, yet few of those present failed to get his point.

"I've had occasion once before, Buell, to point out that I happen to be in charge of these men." His glance swept the posse. "I aim to question Marble here, and I don't take very kindly to your interference—"

"Then turn up that stolen money in a hurry!" Dude thundered. "Don't flatter yourself I'm here solely to quarrel with you neither, Stevens. I want results!"

Pat stared him down witheringly. "It so happens," he retorted temperately, "that I'm a depositor in the Dutch Springs bank, the same as yourself. If you think I'll deliberately hold up the recovery of my own money just to spite you, get it out of your head! You're simply holdin' me up in my work, Buell. Now, can I ask yuh to act the man, and stay out of my hair for ten minutes?"

Dude muttered angrily, flinging away. He knew Stevens was somehow managing to nullify the impression he had striven to create with the posse members, and this galled him without suggesting an effective remedy.

"Marble, I'll ask yuh to step to one side for a little confab," Pat proceeded calmly. He gestured with his head, and Turk moved up the trail a hundred feet, to seat himself on a rock. There was challenge in the look he slanted up at Pat, and curiosity as well.

Pat said, "We'll waive the question of whether or not you boys were in Dutch Springs this morning. You'll be goin' back with my men—and Sheriff Haley and others'll be allowed to pass on those horses you—happen to be riding. Every one of 'em," he reminded dryly, "was seen by thirty or forty men at least; and if any of

those men are a little slower to identify yourself, no doubt you'll be able to explain how you and your friends came in possession of the horses."

He was grinning as he concluded, and Marble's veiled gaze sought the ground troubledly. He had heard the closing snap of the trap in Pat's indirect remarks, and knew well enough that there would be no escape.

"Yuh got us, Stevens," he burst out, with suppressed force. "But I swear I've told nothin' but the truth—"

"About Jap not bein' along, you mean?" Pat inserted slyly.

"I mean about that bank money," Turk insisted stubbornly. "I said we never saw a dollar of that haul, and I mean it!"

Pat surveyed him with mock incredulity. "I see. Then you rode into town, pried your way in that bank, and broke away through the gunsmoke again—for exactly nothing."

A round-faced, bullet-headed individual of indeterminate age, with a pantherish liteness in every unconscious movement of his body, Marble appeared laboring just now under a strong sense of injustice. An instant later, it came spilling out of him indignantly.

"Hell! I know it looks crazy on the face of it. But, Stevens—we was double-crossed on that deal! I swear we was!"

Pat was so surprised at the words that he stood mute for a space. None better than he knew into how many ramifications such a turn of affairs could lead.

"Double-crossed, eh?" he echoed musingly. "Now, that interests me a heap. Tell me more, Turk—"

A wonderful country
"I tell yuh, we was!" Marble thrust on, strongly persuasive. "The least I can say, Stevens, is that you're barkin' plumb in the wrong direction. That's a straight tip—and if you're as shrewd as I take yuh to be, it ought to be worth a stiff price."

"Such as?" Pat caught him up, lightly.

Never one to waste an opportunity, the outlaw spoke bluntly. "Turn us loose," he urged. "Yuh know we haven't got that money. We're no thunderin' use to yuh, because we don't even know where it is—"

"Could I be sure of that, I wonder?"

"Yuh sure could, Stevens!" Marble was grim. "Because if we *had* known, you'd a found it on us, sure as a gun!"

Mark
It appeared an argument that would hold water. While it carried no conceivable weight in any event, Pat was not above dangling hope before the man in the interests of eliciting more information.

"Well, I don't know. Make it better worth my while, can't yuh?" he suggested. "This double-cross you claim, now—"

But Turk Marble had suddenly gone dumb. Glancing behind him to ascertain the cause, Pat saw Dude Buell approaching purposefully. Frowning, he waited.

"Stevens," Dude called out, "we've decided that Marble and his pals may've cached that money somewhere—"

"Oh. So yuh no longer think Jap's busy about now, hidin' it under his bed?"

Buell examined both Pat and Marble with keen curiosity before replying. Plainly he would have given much to have overheard their talk.

"It ain't that," he tossed back blandly. "But is Turk Marble fool enough to trust Kershaw with all that money?"

Pat grunted. It seemed to him a trifling reason for interrupting just at this time. "*Are* yuh, Turk?"

But Marble had clammed up at last. His glance flicked over Buell bleakly, and warily withdrew. "I've said my say, Stevens—till yuh do as I ask," he muttered.

"And what did you say?" Dude rasped instantly.

"Whatever it was, where the money went wasn't a part of it," retorted Pat shortly. "Maybe you can suggest where we should look for it, Buell?"

Dude threw out his hands. "How in hell should I know? We'll have to back-track, is all, and keep our eyes open."

"That's an idea, anyway." Pat's tone said that he didn't think much of it. "Since we'll be going back, we'll give it a try."

Marble was ordered to remount, and for safety's sake the hands of the trio were bound behind their backs. Sullenly they headed back down the trail, a posseman guarding each.

Buell rode out in front now, not far from Turk Marble. As the way led down through the pines, Dude's eyes were busy, gazing about in every direction on the lookout for a possible cache. In many places, the trail of the outlaws during the course of their flight could be plainly read. It was not necessary here to question their actions. But at one point, the way led past the fringe of a miniature badlands, an organ-like collection of rocky columns, fluted and broken, tinted in many colors; and here the rocky ground underfoot was so hard that no

tracks whatever could be discerned, much less closely traced.

Dude halted his horse to gaze about the lonely spot suspiciously. Thousands of nooks and corners offered themselves in the whole expanse of this flinty devil's *escritoire* for the hiding of anything. Buell slanted a slow look at Marble.

"Didn't happen to stop here on your way up, did yuh?" he growled harshly.

Turk's answer was a glance of venomous contempt. He deigned no vocal response, and even Pat was struck by his strange manner. In fact, there appeared a bristling, hotly personal relationship between Dude and the outlaw leader which could hardly have sprung up in the course of a first meeting, unless it was accepted as inevitable that the pair found themselves naturally and violently antipathetic.

"Okay, Dude." Pat was gently satiric. "Take a look around, and satisfy yourself. The bank money *might* be layin' under a rock here somewhere."

Obviously Buell didn't intend to let ridicule deter him from his fixed purpose. Getting down, he started to prowl about through the rocks, followed by several other possemen. As he sat his saddle near Marble, Pat's smile was tolerant.

"He just ain't passing up any chances," he remarked to the outlaw.

Turk's grunt expressed abysmal disgust. "I needn't tell yuh the money ain't what's stickin' in his craw—no matter what he says," he growled cryptically.

Pat had an idea that he was right. He was not surprised when Dude and the others straggled back, to

report no luck. They started down the trail once more, Buell sticking close to the saturnine outlaw, having nosed aside one of the other possemen.

"Reckon he's cut Marble out as his own special charge," Sam muttered in Pat's hearing, uneasily. "Keeps talkin' at him, too—if he don't get much in the way of an answer . . . Think we better break that game up, Stevens?"

Pat's reply was a faint headshake. "Let 'em alone, Sam," he advised. "I think I know what this'll lead to. If I should happen to be right, it'll satisfy me about one thing."

Sloan did not ask for further elucidation, but he followed instructions to the extent of giving Buell and his outlaw captive plenty of room. Others gave them an equally wide berth. The result of this course of action made itself all too evident half an hour later.

The men were threading a narrow trail through a thick pine and piñon growth, scattered well out in single file, when suddenly a wrathy bellow and a crashing of brush sounded from one point on the trail. It worked off through the trees and speedily faded out. Wheeling back, Pat retraced his course till he ran into the posseman guarding the outlaw called Keno.

"Turk Marble and Dude were between us a minute ago," Pat barked at the guard. "Where'd they disappear to?"

The posseman's shrug was expressive. "Yore guess is as good as mine," he tossed back tersely. "If yuh wanna know what I *think*—"

Pat did not delay to hear the rest. Cutting off the trail, he worked a way through the heavy growth. He ran into no one, but the deeply gouged tracks cutting

through the brush showed plainly enough what to expect.

It was ten minutes before Dude Buell came jogging back. He was alone. His clothes were snagged, his blocky square visage scratched and grimly set. Pat met him quietly.

"I was afraid Marble would try to make a break," he observed tonelessly. "Did he get away?"

"He's gone." Dude's face darkened. "Dammit all, Stevens, I thought yuh searched the man—" he burst out accusingly.

The answer was bleak. "You saw me do it, Buell."

"Well, he must've had a knife in his pocket!" Dude insisted stoutly. "Anyway, he got his hands free somehow. First thing I knew, he gave my bronc a wild kick and hauled off into the brush. It took me a minute to get turned around. I got one last flash of Marble, sailin' off through the trees, and that's all. I never caught up with him."

If it was his apology for allowing the prisoner to escape, it was a remarkably bald one. Dude clearly felt he had succeeded in throwing at least a part of the blame off on Stevens's shoulders. Nor did he allow the matter to rest there.

"So there yuh are, Stevens!" he threw out hotly. "Turk Marble's gone, and we never caught as much as a cold scent of that bank money!" He grew increasingly dictatorial as he spoke. "I still think my first guess was the right one. Thing to do now is to hightail straight for Kershaw's Tumbling K and take Jap in tow! *He* knows where that money went, I'll vouch for it!"

But Pat had grown weary of showing his amiable side to this designing autocrat of the saddle.

"No, Buell. I'll have to overrule you," he said flatly. "First we're getting Keno and Shoshone Thompson to the Dutch Springs jail before any other regrettable incident occurs—and I'll let Sheriff Haley know the results of our trip."

"Yuh mean you'll tell him *I* let one of the prisoners get away from us!" exclaimed Dude cynically.

Pat shrugged. "I'll tell him the facts. If they don't suit your taste, you should've thought of that while you were—guarding Marble," he said. "Haley's entitled to know, and we'll let him decide what comes next. Sorry, Dude, but that'll have to be final."

Buell argued and snorted without avail, finally storming off in a fine dudgeon. Sam Sloan watched him go with keenly slitted eyes.

"Way he talks, yuh'd think he deserves all the credit, instead o' what blame there is t' be handed out," he commented disgustedly.

Pat's smile was untroubled. "He may not know it, Sam, but Dude's done me one big favor today . . . Marble's escape was by no means an accident," he hazarded, after a pause. "I don't know yet what the precise hook-up is; but I'm satisfied now that the double-cross Marble hinted at was a reality—and that somehow, somewhere, Dude Buell fits into it in a way that'll surprise us all."

7.

KENO and Shoshone Thompson were never allowed the slim chance of escape which Turk Marble had boldly grasped. On the arrival of the posse in town, the luckless owlhoots were led directly to the jail.

Sheriff Haley for once was on hand to lock the pair in their cells. That done, Pat started to give Brad a terse account of all that had occurred. Dude Buell was very much on hand, apparently anxious to make his own unsolicited report before Stevens found time to let the damaging truth out of the bag.

"Only managed to grab two of 'em, eh?" Haley began, surveying Pat inscrutably.

"Yes—and not only that, but he was never even close to layin' a finger on that stolen cash!" Dude broke in indignantly. "A hell of a deputy you turned out to be." He turned his attention directly to Pat, much as if the idea had only just occurred to him. "Draggin' in a couple of second-rate long riders, after the big brag yuh were makin'!"

In the privacy of Haley's office, Pat merely turned to look at the speaker, omitting any reply whatever. In the face of the facts, he failed so much as to show a reaction; it was the lawman who bent a sharp glance on Buell, frowning with quick irritation. With admirable restraint, he refrained from comment.

"Turned out t' be Turk Marble's gang, after all—"

Haley began afresh, turning once more to Pat.

"Turk was there, all right." The latter nodded. "And of course, these two you locked up are his boys."

"But don't overlook that fourth man," Buell again interposed, in his grating tones. "The one yuh never saw, Stevens. Jap Kershaw—the man you're doin' your best to cover!"

Pat's expression was provokingly blank. "Cover?"

Sheriff Haley made a violent gesture of disgust. "I've been tryin' to talk to you for five minutes, Stevens! If it'll relieve yore mind any to poke him one—" he jerked his chin toward Dude suggestively—"why, go ahead!"

Pat only grimaced. "I gave up slappin' at flies years ago, Haley," he remarked. "Thought I'd just let yuh get your own idea of what I've put up with all day."

His face beetlike, Buell exploded in noisy heat. "What damned, superior tommyrot!" he ejaculated. "If either one of yuh think I'll stand for any high-nosed official authority—!"

"Wal, then, dammit all, Buell, get out!" rumbled Haley aggressively. "Man to man, straight off the chest, right now you're a damned nuisance! Is that plain enough?"

Pat looked at the pair of them in mild wonder. It was true that nerves were ragged just at this time, but he had hardly expected prominent townsmen to spring at each other's throats in this fashion. It was another item in the chain of strange circumstances of which he had taken careful note of late—perhaps one of the strangest.

Baldly affronted, Dude could only glare in indigna-

tion. "Reckon I get you, all right," he said grimly. "Just look elsewhere after this, Haley, for any help yuh may happen to need!"

He stalked out of the jail like a much-injured man, and the Sheriff took a turn across the office, battling his angry distraction. "Mebby now we can get down to cases," he muttered. "Just give me the whole story, Stevens. I'll see what I can make of it."

Pat related the day's events, from the time of starting. It suited him to voice his full grievance against Dude Buell, leading up to, and including, Turk Marble's needless escape. The story drew a roar of disdain from Brad.

"The danged fool insisted on goin'," he exclaimed. "Reckon I should've been warned. But he was frettin' like all get-out about his money—"

"There happens to be a dollar or two of my own involved," remarked Pat dryly.

"Didn't make yuh play the fool, anyway," responded Haley, shaking his head in puzzlement. "I still don't savvy where that money could've gone to. Let's go in an' haul Keno and Shoshone over the coals."

After proceeding to the cell block, they questioned the outlaws at some length. While it was no trouble to trick the pair into confessing their share of the bank stickup, they proved of little further use. They stuck to it that not a dollar of the institution's money had passed into their hands; and beyond that, they could tell nothing. To Pat at least, it gradually became obvious that they were totally ignorant of the details of the mysterious double-cross at which Marble had hinted.

"I don't know," Haley grumbled discontentedly as

they retraced their way to the jail office. "If Marble wasn't packin' that money, an' these boys don't know a thing, it looks like our next play is to bring Jap in—"

"If Jap's our man," Pat nodded, with some reserve.

Brad spread his palms. "Lost track o' that fourth man between Cottonwood Creek an' Sunrise, didn't yuh? Well, then!"

"It looks bad for Kershaw," admitted Pat. "I've been stallin' it off for Kyle's sake, but it looks now as if I'll end up by havin' to pick Jap up." He paused. "I suppose there's no question the money *did* disappear from the bank?"

"Good gravy! Yuh don't mean yuh doubt the word o' them responsible men, as against Turk Marble's story—?" Haley grunted, incredulous.

Pat's brows lifted mildly. "What *is* their story?" he countered.

Haley looked at the floor. "Accordin' to Keeler, the actual loss is close to twenty thousand. He made a thorough check today. It left him in a state of collapse."

"And no wonder. At that, Ab's far from the only loser—"

"Don't I know it!" Brad almost groaned. "Folks've been givin' me a hard time all day. I'd rather've been with you, Stevens! I don't know . . ."

He paused, struck suddenly by the knowledge that someone stood silently in the outer door. It was Al Henshew. Seeing himself discovered, the hotelman pushed in, belligerent of manner.

"Blast it, Haley! Are yuh still hangin' around the office?" he opened up bitterly. "You know now who's been pullin' these jobs here in town! When in God's

name are yuh goin' to *do* somethin' about Turk Marble?"

"Now, Al! Because yuh got burned yourself, don't think yuh can run my job for me!" Brad whipped back, bristling.

"Somebody better do it!" retorted Henshew, in his bitter manner.

Their recriminations ran on, carrying more heat than common sense. Silently watching the arguing men, Pat was at little loss to read the incident correctly. It did not escape him that, although ostensibly addressed to Haley, the hotelman's thinly veiled accusations of inaction were aimed pretty clearly at himself. He was not surprised. Henshew's vehement resentment only represented the sentiment of indignant merchants and businessmen in Dutch Springs, determined to put an end to this rash of robberies and depredations, if any means offered short of doing it themselves.

"I had to tell Dude Buell in so many words to get out and let me do my work," the Sheriff wound up his curt defense, red to the collar. "You're next, Henshew—"

"Then call a halt t' this lallygaggin', or the commissioners'll hear about it!" the gallused hotel proprietor fired as a parting shot from the door. Muttering to himself, he stormed away.

Pat's smile was cold as he watched Brad Haley wipe his brow with a bedraggled bandana.

"Shall I turn in my star, Brad?" he inquired. "You might pick up a sharper man somewhere amongst these hot-collar boys."

Haley paused, arrested. "Tired of it already, eh?" he grunted. "I've no complaint, Stevens. But if yuh prefer it that way—"

Pat shook his head positively. "I'll stick. I'd rather turn in my badge than have you ask for it, is all."

"I see." Haley frowned portentously. "Wal, yuh better do somethin' about Jap Kershaw before too long."

"I expect to." Pat was equally sententious. "Of course, if Jap *is* involved, there's the little matter of locating him first."

"I'll leave it t' you, how to go about that," growled Brad.

"Fine."

Pat had his own ideas in the matter; and moving downstream in search of Sam, who had headed straight for a restaurant on arriving in town, he turned them over soberly. He was passing Cash Cohannon's grocery, a few doors below, when the storeman accosted him from the doorway.

"Don't see yuh wearin' that new star, Stevens," he called, half-facetiously. "Are yuh hidin' it?"

Pat pretended to investigate his pockets and finally nodded. "Ain't taking a chance of scarin' the robbers away," he explained, dead-pan.

"It's purty much got around that them Kershaws are mixed up in it," Cohannon responded seriously. "Seems like they c'd be run down in short order!"

"Well—" Pat was in no hurry to answer this. "I have heard Jap mentioned." He emphasized the name.

Cohannon scoffed. "Like father, like son," he averred cynically. "The feelin' seems t' be that that goes for the lot!"

"Dude Buell remarked as much to me." Pat nodded gravely, watching the other.

"Sure. An' me, too!" Cohannon fell into the trap. "It's my opinion the whole family will stand cleanin' out!"

Pat carefully talked away from any such blanket accusation as this, before going on; but he had full opportunity half an hour later to observe rumor's sinister working amongst these thoughtless townsmen.

He was about to step into Jeb Winters's general store when a wrathy yell and a rattle of iron wagon-tires upstream caused him to glance around. To his astonishment he saw Will Kershaw determinedly driving forward in the ranch wagon. A man standing on the boardwalk was waving an angry fist after him, and men on store porches gave the young fellow the full benefit of a decidedly unfriendly attention.

Stern of face, Will hauled up before Winters's store. Wrapping the long lines round the hitch-rack, he swept Stevens with a single watchful glance.

"Howdy, Will." Pat nodded as the other came hurrying up the steps.

Kershaw jerked a curt acknowledgment without words, shoving on into the store to disappear in the shadowy and cavernous interior. Angry words from in there presently drew Pat in after him.

"I didn't come in here lookin' for nasty remarks!" Pat heard in Will's irate tones. "Fill my order, and I'll be goin'—"

Will stood challengingly at the grocery counter, striving to stare down two or three men grouped before him. Pat saw at once that they had started in on the boy at the moment of his appearance.

"Yuh got yore gall, comin' here at all, Kershaw!" one of them threw out.

"Why didn't Jap come, an' be done with it?" another inserted.

"Yeh. He's buyin' grub to supply what's left of that gang, like as not," topped a third vindictively.

Will faced them, at bay, his lips clamped tight over the blistering tirade he well knew would do nothing to further his cause now.

"Since when have you men taken over Judge Blaine's duties?" put in a new, young, and biting voice that was obviously a girl's. "Passing judgment on entire families can be no part of your work. I'm quite sure Will Kershaw has never done anything to any of you!"

Peeping over a counter piled high with blankets, Pat could not help admiring Libby Haley's forthright air of indignant condemnation. Spots of color burning in her cheeks, she faced young Will's tormentors as if they were her personal enemies.

"Well! Don't stand there twitching your feet! What have you to say for yourselves?"

Will appeared fully as nonplused as anyone else, staring at her with dropped jaw. Slowly suspicion stole into his slate-grey eyes, his bronzed face hard and lean.

"Much obliged for nothin', ma'am," he tossed at her tartly. "I'm still able to look after myself without help from the lady sheriff." He managed to instil a flick of sarcasm into the words. "Hard as it may be to believe, the Kershaws still think they're just about as good as any of these local gadflies!"

"I can readily believe it," the girl answered bravely. "But I can hardly believe that these men realize what

they're doing, when they attempt to hinder and molest an innocent man—”

“If you think you’re his nurse,” one of the goaded men said harshly, “get him out of here, before he gets hurt!”

“Yeah—and make it snappy, Kershaw!” another blurted out. “Yore old man ain’t makin’ fools of us, nor you neither! If yuh aim to feed Turk Marble, or any of his crowd, get yore grub elsewhere!”

“That’s mighty strong language, Caffery,” put in Jeb Winters, the white-aproned proprietor, from behind the counter. “Yuh don’t happen to be speakin’ for me now . . . There’s nothin’ definite against Will Kershaw, nor his pa neither. I’ll continue waitin’ on ‘em till there is!”

Pat silently applauded the merchant’s common sense stand, but apparently Winters was not carrying the others with him so readily.

“Yuh can throw a pile of groceries in a box for him, Jeb,” retorted the man called Caffery dogmatically. “Whether he carries it out o’ here is another matter!”

“Shame on you, Chick Caffery!” cried Libby, stung by the threat of raw violence. “Why don’t you go get a job and mind your own affairs?”

Pat thought it time at this point to intervene. He strolled out from behind the concealing counter, in the midst of a suddenly descending silence, and glanced at one face after another with deliberate curiosity.

“Your box looks pretty hefty, Will,” he told Kershaw matter-of-factly. “Maybe I can help yuh carry it out—”

There was a suppressed snort of exasperation at this. But none of the sullen-faced hecklers cared to dispute Pat’s authority since he had bothered to pin his dep-

uty's badge in plain sight on his shirt pocket before stepping into view.

"No help, Stevens," Will answered tightly. "All I need is to be left alone!"

He picked up the laden box and, ignoring the girl standing nearby, somewhat self-consciously, started boldly for the door. Noting Libby's despondent expression, Pat winked at her casually.

"No harm in my steppin' outside with yuh, anyway," he told Will coolly.

Neglecting to reply, Kershaw made his way to the street and stowed his box in the wagon, while Stevens watched from the edge of the porch. The young fellow was stepping up to the seat, after retrieving the reins, when a lusty bellow rang out.

"Hey, there, Kershaw! Where yuh think you're goin'?"

Pat saw the half-tipsy cowboy start to draw his gun. His own Colt slid out of the leather with smooth speed. At its crack, the drunken puncher dropped his weapon with a surprised yell and grabbed at his arm.

"All right, Will!" Pat's sharp tone cracked like a lash. "You'll have to see it through, now you've started. Get going!"

Kershaw understood. Standing up in the wagon bed, he lashed smartly at the horses with the rein ends, and the vehicle started forward with a tremendous jerk.

Poised alertly, Pat saw a man run out, some distance up the street, swinging a lariat. He read what was coming. He sprang to the hitch rail, whipped free the bridle rein of a tethered saddlehorse and vaulted astride, kicking the astonished animal into a lunging run.

He was in time to see the wide loop of the riata hover above Will's head. Despite Kershaw's wild snatch, his attempt to duck, it settled down over his body. Swinging his bronc wide of the wagon, Pat raced down on the man who wielded that lethal loop. Dropping it with a yell, the man strove in vain to spring aside. Pat's mount, striking him brutally on the shoulder, tumbled him bouncing into the dust. Stevens pounded on. Swaying toward the wagon, wary of that dragging rope, he rolled from the saddle to land squarely in the box, right himself, and grab young Kershaw just as he was on the point of pitching overboard. The borrowed cow-pony slowed and turned back.

Grasping the lines of the team, Pat steadied them to a smooth run, giving Kershaw time to get a grip on himself. "That was mighty close," he said presently, flashing the white-faced boy a grin.

"Don't know what yuh did it for, either," exclaimed Will, his gaze frankly defiant. "Don't tell me *you* ain't holdin' the same suspicions against us Kershaws as them buzzards behind us! For all I know, this may be your cute way of gettin' to spy on us! It looked like it before, with yore big-hearted generosity, and, damn you, it still does!"

Pat saw that the young fellow had been baited today to the point of frenzy. His glance was withering.

"I've known Jap was a fool, for several days—but I expected better from you . . . Whatever you think," he proceeded levelly, "now I'm fairly started, I'll see you get home in one piece, Kershaw. Like it or not as you please, you'll have to put up with it!"

8.

WILL KERSHAW proved to be poor company on the drive out to the Tumbling K. He appeared to be striving to make up his mind about Pat; and after opening up for a few words, at long intervals, he would fall taciturn again. Knowing him to be carrying a man-size burden for one of his twenty-odd untried years, Stevens left him pretty much to himself. But there was one topic about which he felt an increasing hope that he might straighten the young fellow out.

"Will," he observed, after one of their silences, "your experience with girls seems to have been small."

Kershaw thought that one over. "If yuh mean Lib Haley," he returned deliberately, "I'm willin' to let it ride as it lays."

Pat shook his head. "All I can tell yuh," he said judicially, "is that you'd be the loser . . . You know Libby's trying her best to be your friend, don't yuh? You're not making it easy for her."

Will's face went set and resolute, much as if against his own will. "Don't kid me, Stevens! She hasn't a particle of use for any of us Kershaws, and shows it—"

"Oh, now." Pat was smiling broadly. "Imagination sure is a wonderful thing."

The boy turned defiant. "Don't tell me black is

white! Yuh heard what she said about Dad, Stevens!"

"Humph! She inferred that bein' downright lax about water rights often leads to range trouble—and, brother, it does! That's all she said in my hearing that could be twisted into a slur against anybody. A general remark—and the girl's been trying to make up for it ever since she saw how yuh took it. But you won't let her."

Kershaw looked away, wooden-faced. "I'd like to—" he began, only to stop, obviously struggling with himself. "Maybe she *is* tryin' to be fair, in her own way," he burst out forcefully, then. "It don't mean a blasted thing! How could it?"

Pat was not slow in detecting a mute appeal in this hopeless query, which told him all that he needed to know. He covered smoothly, turning the subject off with a few words.

"I'll never try to tell yuh your business," he commented blandly. "Libby's a good kid, in spite of that red hair. Just be nice to her for me, and you won't lose."

It was more than enough to hold Will thoughtfully silent until the rig rolled into the Tumbling K yard. The young fellow hauled up before the house to unload the supplies, and Pat turned in the seat to face the ranch-house door as old Kyle appeared in the opening.

Kyle's eyes narrowed as he caught sight of Pat, and he slowly nodded. "Howdy, Stevens—"

"Hello, Kershaw." Pat was casual. "How's everything?"

"Middlin'," Kyle allowed meagerly. Well acquainted with the subtle art of sparring, he waited for what was

to come. Pat glanced about inattentively, as if there was nothing in particular on his mind.

"Quiet here today. Where's Jap?" he inquired suddenly.

Kyle's brooding eyes went opaque. His hesitation was of the briefest; and when his words came, they sheared straight to the vital point.

"Jap ain't got that bank money, Stevens!" he declared flatly.

Pat's smile drew thin. "Way ahead of me, ain't yuh?" he asked lightly.

But Kershaw refused to be pushed around; and even young Will paused, in the act of lifting the box of groceries out of the wagon, to listen.

"Mebby I mentioned that money first," Kyle rumbled stolidly. "But I know you've turned deputy, Stevens. This ain't no social call!"

Pat's headshake was slight. "You're right, there. At least, I'll admire to learn Jap's whereabouts during the last twelve hours," he said frankly.

"Wal, I ain't so good at alibis—"

"Meaning yuh don't know?"

Kershaw stared, in no hurry whatever to rush at that one. Pat did not allow him much time to find his stance.

"Tell me this, Kershaw," he proposed. "Just why were you hunting Jap so anxious, last night in town?"

"I wasn't." By speaking promptly, Kyle had him there. "If you'll recall, it was Will here, I was askin' for."

"Not interested in Jap, then, eh?"

Kyle's tone hardened. "I *said* Will, didn't I?"

"So you did." Pat's gaze slitted speculatively. "But yuh found him finally?"

"Sure. He was home here—like you said."

"And still here this morning, I expect?"

"I was." Will spoke for himself, with perfect firmness.

"That's settled, then." Stevens paused. "But, Kershaw, we're talkin' all around Jap—and I still haven't got the answer . . . Of course yuh know we've got a couple of prisoners in town. And I had a talk with Turk Marble. Not that the boys gave Jap away—deliberately, anyway."

His meaning could hardly have been missed. Both the Kershaws stood still as statues. Kyle's leathery face slowly turned brick red.

"I don't believe it!" he roared. "If Marble so much as implied Jap was along with him on that crazy bank haul, he lies!"

Pat shrugged. "Why should Turk Marble even have occasion to know who Jap was?" he countered negligently.

The query was casual. It was unanswerable as well. Kyle's face grew long as he saw how matters stood. His eyes were desperate.

"I'll tell yuh the truth, Stevens!" he burst out, with an expulsion of suspended breath. "Two days ago, Marble an' his men rode in here with Jap, bold as brass. I knowed they was up to somethin', and I raised an almighty row. Marble left. Jap never guessed what he was gettin' into! He promised t' stay away from the man—an' you heard me order him back to work on that dam in the hills."

Pat was much interested in the knowledge that he and Sam had apparently missed Turk Marble's crowd, here at the Tumbling K, by a matter of minutes.

"Go on."

Kershaw drew a deep breath, earnestness beading his brow with perspiration. "Jap was mad—he sneaked into town yesterday. But it was only for a spree, Stevens, I swear! Jap had nothin' to do with that holdup!"

Pat was in a position personally to swear that Jap had indeed taken advantage of his opportunity—if this had been his object.

"But you never did catch up with *him* that night," he remarked.

Kyle remained stubborn. "He got wind I was in town an' legged it."

"Back to his job on the dam, yuh mean?"

"Wal—the work's bein' done!"

Pat nodded thoughtfully. "According to you, then, Jap should be up there now—"

"Dammit, man!" Kershaw was almost bilious. "Do yuh still question that?"

Pat shook a curt negative. "Not till I know it to be a fact. I've made a fool of myself before, Kershaw, and I learnt to go slow on these things . . . I'll just borrow a bronc, if it's okay with you," he proceeded firmly, "and ride up there for a talk with Jap."

Kyle looked up at the sky, shading into rosy evening. He opened his mouth to speak, clamped it shut again, and shrugged.

"Why should I suggest that yuh wait till mornin'?" he growled. "You're askin' for it, Stevens. Yuh know how much use Jap's got for yuh—"

Pat climbed down from the wagon, his smile slightly twisted. "Maybe I can talk him out of it," he said easily.

Kyle turned to Will. "Get him a good horse."

Will moved to comply, with the manner of bowing to the inevitable. It was increasingly clear to Pat that neither of these men was as sure of Jap Kershaw as they wanted to be—or strove to appear. They both hoped he would find Jap at the dam, and dreaded the results of that meeting.

“Much obliged, Will.”

Pat swung astride the saddled horse, a dun mare with springy stride, and turned toward the hills. He did not look back. There would be barely time to reach the diversion dam deep in the folded hills before dusk fell, and he applied himself to the task without much thought of his talk with Kyle.

But one idea persisted which he was unable wholly to shake off. Despite all Kershaw’s specious argument, the man had been unable actually to account for Jap’s movements, either last night or today; and not all the words he had woven over the subject, back and forth, had been able to cover that fact up.

“Jap’ll have some stiff accountin’ to do on his own, when I catch up with him,” mused Pat.

The rough going up Snake Canyon presently forced him to ignore the many puzzles plaguing his mind of late. The Kershaws had spent little effort in clearing out a trail, and again and again he found himself circling down timber or high-piled heaps of boulders left by the storm torrents.

Noting presently the increased difficulty of taking in his surroundings, he glanced up. The sky was darkening above the canyon shoulders, gloom gathering under the cliffs. It was only a mile to the Kershaw’s dam now. As poor a place as this wild, remote corner of the hills

seemed in which to be caught by descending darkness, Pat shoved on briskly.

He came to the site of Kyle's diversion project at a time when barely sufficient light remained in which to glance about. It was a lonely, forsaken spot, fenced in by forbidding dark, spear-pointed bull pine and fir. He spotted at once the tumbledown shack in which Jap Kershaw lived whenever he stayed here long enough to do a little work.

The slab door was jammed shut, and he saw at once that no smoke issued from the sagging tin-pipe chimney. Whatever Kyle Kershaw chose to maintain, there wasn't a soul here now; and from the deserted aspect of the place, no one had done any work hereabouts for several days.

"Kyle better jog up here for a look if he thinks he can expect runnin' water in the canyon this week," reflected Pat grimly.

Even through the thickening dusk, murmurous with the weirdly chuckling waters of Horseshoe Creek, he was able to determine how little advance had been made in the work which Kershaw counted on to enhance the value of his ranch. Felled pines and slash lay along the creek's edge, and a few casual shovelfuls of earth had been turned. That was all.

"Wal! Why don't *yuh* grab a mattock an' start in," a resonant voice spoke up startlingly as Pat surveyed the scene. He whirled in the saddle to note the dim outlines of Ezra, regarding him dourly from the edge of the pines near at hand. Pat stared at the lanky redhead for a moment fixedly, with some pretense of severity in his manner.

"Been wonderin' where in time you'd got to," he grunted finally. "I set you to watch young Will—and three hours ago I was forced to tear him away from the wolves myself, there in town."

Ezra disposed of this pointed accusation with a gesture. "I been busy on my own hook, Stevens, so yuh might's well forgit it." He paused. "What're you doin' up here?"

"Hunting Jap—"

"Yuh won't find 'im in these diggin's."

Pat shook his head in agreement. "I didn't particularly expect to. And what's your plausible excuse for bein' here?"

Ez showed his wolfish fangs in a grin. "Waitin' for you, my nosy friend. You're bound t' admit I didn't make no mistake, bein' able t' read yore mind as I am. Only you're so dang late in catchin' up with my expectations of yuh, there ain't nothin' to be done t'night."

Pat stepped out of the saddle, wearier than he cared to admit. "Don't tell me you've had sense enough to carry a little coffee in your saddle pocket?" he growled hopefully.

"Better'n that," Ez replied. "I located Jap's supply—an' a leetle side-meat, too."

They made no bones of finding themselves at home in the shack. Full dark saw them sitting down to a passable supper, and Pat was not long in rolling into a blanket.

"Wal! I must say you're a blasted unsociable cuss," remarked Ezra huffily, addressing his motionless back. "Goin' off t' sleep before I've so much as enjoyed a smoke after the meal I provided yuh!" But he knew

how many hours Pat had spent in the saddle today, without rest and, for the most part, without food as well.

Ezra was up first in the spreading grey light of the following morning. He stepped into the shack, after prowling about outside, as Pat was stamping into his boots. His single eye was slitted shrewdly.

"Lots o' cayuse tracks round here," he announced portentously. "If Jap's been here lately—an' he sure has—he's had plenty o' visitors."

"Oh, hell." Pat was sententious. "Get breakfast ready, and let's not haggle over what we both know perfectly well. Of course, Turk Marble's been here! But right now it's Jap I'm anxious to catch up with. We'll eat an' go after him."

After downing a hasty breakfast, they saddled up and set out. Pat ignored the pony tracks leading out of this lonely gorge and set a direct course for a tiny mountain village situated on the west slope of the Culebras. Ezra stole a glance at him.

"Figured out where t' go, have yuh?" he queried knowingly.

Pat's nod was brief. "I suppose you followed Jap to Cascade," he hazarded.

Ezra was equally laconic. "Yep—an' watched him join Turk Marble there." He delayed, a shadow of thought wrinkling his brows. "But, Pat, if them two hombres're sharin' that bank money between 'em, they ain't spendin' any of it!"

Pat got his point. Cascade was not a town in which even the shadiest sojourner would be called on to explain the source of sudden affluence. If Kershaw and

Marble were not spending there, it meant they didn't have it to spend.

Midday saw the pair dropping down a rock-bound hill pass, miles from Powder Valley. Cascade lay only a little way below, on the first bench. They approached circumspectly, leaving the beaten trail and cutting an easy circle through the pines.

Named for the tumbling mountain creek at its back, Cascade was only a grey, weatherbeaten collection of tumbledown buildings fringing a wide spot in the road. Crouching quietly under the trees, the place bore a sinister air, not so much of desertion as of danger lying in wait.

The growl of the creek covering the sound of their horses, Pat and Ezra rode to a point from which it was possible to scan the street. They were dismounting to tether the broncs when Ezra gave a muffled exclamation.

"Damned if that ain't Jap Kershaw comin' up-street now," he muttered, staring.

He was right. Pat identified the hawklike face and rugged frame of Will's brother. Sauntering up the dusty road, Jap passed behind a weathered building to disappear.

"Let's get down there," Pat murmured.

They made for a boarded-up house several rods beyond, reached its rear and moved quietly down the farther side. Ez peeped round the front corner into the street, and withdrew.

"Take a look, Stevens—"

Peering cautiously, Pat descried two men seated on a store porch several doors above and desultorily con-

versing. One of the two was Jap. And the other was the outlaw, Turk Marble.

Pat drew back as quickly as Ezra had done, an expression of concern shading his face. But if he was wondering just how to handle this situation, his tone was serene.

"That's that, Ez." There was the click of finality in the words. "Now we'll keep a watch on those birds for a while."

Turk and his companion sat on the store porch and smoked for the best part of an hour before they got up. They were seen wandering across to the saloon opposite, but remained inside only about long enough for a single lingering drink. Back on the street again, they strolled about in the manner of men obviously killing time.

Ezra and Pat continued their watch throughout the afternoon. From their actions, it would have been difficult to imagine that the renegade pair had only recently been engaged in a desperate affair, or that they conceived it possible that danger might threaten them even now. After supper at the single boarding-house, toward dusk they retired once more to the Elkhorn Bar and showed signs of sitting the evening out.

Pat and Ez were working toward the rear of the Elkhorn when a dragging scuffle of boots somewhere near caused them to dive for the cover of a pile of loose lumber. Here they crouched, finally lifting their heads for a cautious look.

A grey-headed, slouching old man was limping toward the rear of the saloon, where he knocked once, guardedly, at the rear door and a moment later slipped silently inside.

"Wal, blast my buttons!" Sitting back on his haunches, Ezra expelled a pent-up breath almost explosively. "Stevens, did yuh see who that was?"

Pat had. In the thickening twilight he had been conscious of a cold chill of discovery stealing along his nerves on recognizing the bent frame and limping gait of Lyte Kramer, Dude Buell's aging Dutch Springs handyman.

9.

"DON'T TELL ME," Ezra muttered almost to himself, after Lyte Kramer had disappeared into the Elkhorn, "that ornery old buck rode all the way over here t' Cascade to hang one on, outa sight of his friends!"

Pat chuckled grimly. "Whatever it was that brought him so far, it wasn't a bottle, Ez. I've seen Lyte tip too many right in Dutch Springs . . . All the same, this is damned interestin'. It'll stand some lookin' into."

Ez jerked a nod. "Let's git about it."

Adjoining a disused blacksmith shop on one side, on the other the Elkhorn Bar bordered a vacant lot, used at one time for storage by some now defunct or long-departed freighting outfit. Still profusely littered with piles of decaying boxes and barrels, it afforded ideal cover for their purpose.

They lost no time in working to a position opposite one of the barroom windows, through which Marble

and Jap Kershaw could be seen footing up to the bar. Even as Pat spotted them, they turned at a call, and a moment later moved from view.

"Sittin' down at one o' them rear tables, mebby?" Ezra guessed, when a moment or two passed and they failed to reappear.

For answer, Pat moved silently toward the window and, edging as close as he dared without risk of detection, peered inside cautiously. Ezra was waiting for him when he fell back once more.

"See 'em?" the big fellow muttered.

Pat grunted a negative. "I can't locate Kramer there in the bar, either," he murmured.

Both readily understood the significance of this circumstance. Obviously the renegade leader and his companion could only be conferring with old Lyte in one of the rear rooms of the place.

"Wal, now. That *is* a thing!" Ezra exclaimed.

"Ain't it just," Pat nodded wry concurrence.

It occurred to neither to question the likelihood that this clandestine meeting established a link between the outlaws and the man who paid Lyte Kramer a nominal wage for running his errands.

"My nose cert'nly is improvin' in m' old age," commented Ez. "I sure 'nough smell somethin' rotten, all the way from Dutch Springs! . . . Just where does this put Dude Buell, Pat?"

"From here, he seems to be casin' the doghouse for size," Pat shrugged. "But it might pay off to wait a bit. We may see more—"

"How much more do yuh need?" growled Ez.

"If I knew that," retorted Pat shortly, "there wouldn't be any use in waitin', would there?"

Moving back into the shadows of the debris cluttering the freight yard, they waited. Within fifteen minutes they heard the back door of the Elkhorn creak open and then jam shut again. A dark figure limped away through the gloom, the sound of his progress presently dying out.

"That's Kramer," Ez announced. "He ain't wastin' no time hangin' around!"

It only added to the gravity of his hidden purpose here in Cascade. Out of strong curiosity they stole once more toward the saloon window and were in time to see Jap Kershaw expansively purchasing a bottle of liquor at the bar. He and Marble likewise selected cigars and moved off toward a table where they meant to make themselves comfortable.

Ezra dug Pat's ribs significantly with a thumb of the size and hardness of an axe helve.

"Look at that! Them two've been paid off, an' they're blowin' theirselves to a time," he said portentously. "Now's our chance t' overhaul old Lyte an' put the squeeze on him—"

"What for?" asked Pat dubiously.

"Why—make him belch all he knows. We'll git to the bottom o' this in a hurry!" said Ez stoutly.

"No." Like the veteran hunter he was, Stevens showed no interest whatever in bagging small game. "This time I'm going straight to headquarters, Ez."

"Headquarters—?" Ezra paused, at a loss.

"We'll have a little talk with Turk Marble himself."

That was all right with the big fellow. Left to himself, he would have headed straight for the Elkhorn without ado and might even have clambered in through

the open window as the most expeditious means of achieving his object.

"Hold on," Pat chuckled quietly, stopping him. "The way to keep the other fellow off balance is not to let on how much *yuh* know yourself—at least till he finds it damned inconvenient to have to admit it!"

Ezra lifted his broad shoulders. "Wal, then, if *yuh* think we *might* need our broncs when we come outa there—" he began disparagingly.

Pat was not fooled. "I'd rather have them there, and not need 'em," he grinned, "than the other way around."

After working their way back to the ponies, they circled down to the road beyond the end of town and jogged casually into Cascade as if just arriving via the Dutch Springs trail.

The few lights glinting at intervals along the short street attested to its virtual desertion. They saw the outline of a man leaning in the doorway of the Elkhorn, his face only a dark blot under the shadow of his hat. Noting their approach, this man visibly stiffened and presently faded from sight as he stepped backward into the saloon.

"Reckon we needn't expect no greetin's from the mayor," grumbled Ezra.

Indeed, their welcome here seemed likely to be less than warm. While a moment ago, shadows had passed the few windows in which buttery light gleamed, and an occasional gruff burst of laughter had sounded, the silence now was profound, dead, and somehow ominous.

Giving no evidence of recognizing these signs, they rode boldly forward to haul up before the Elkhorn,

chatting casually as if conscious of no one but themselves. It could have been accidental that they happened to tether the broncs in the densest shadows along the rack, for their movements, as they ducked under and made for the steps, were calm and assured.

They stepped in at the door and paused to glance about.

"Huh! That's funny," Ezra rumbled imperturbably. "I'd a swore I seen somebody in here a minute ago. Now it's plumb empty . . . Yuh reckon we're s'posed t' help ourselves to a drink?"

Voiced solely for the benefit of any hidden listener, the words evoked no answer. Advancing to the bar, Pat swept the dusky rear doors with a keen glance. He waited a moment, then banged on the scarred planks with his gun butt.

Still there was no response, even when Ezra followed suit with considerably more vigor.

"Wal! Nothin' like a little free target practice," the big redhead observed. And reversing his Colt, he amused himself with drawing a bead on the necks of a row of liquor bottles ranked on the back bar.

Lest he should carry his clowning too far, Pat was on the point of putting a stop to this when a footstep whispered at the door in the corner. A scowling man in shirtsleeves moved slowly into the light of the hanging kerosene lamp, staring somberly at Ezra, who gaped back in what was at least masterfully pretended amazement.

"Oh—" snorted Ez, slowly lowering his gun. "Then ever'body didn't rush off to the fire, after all!"

The sour-faced man, whom neither had ever clapped

eyes on before, faced them across the bar, his flinty pupils bleak.

"What do yuh want?" he got out in a dry growl.

Pat took his time looking him over, and his glance strayed. "Make it bourbon," he nodded, sliding a silver dollar onto the bar.

"All out, mister," the man murmured, ignoring the full bottles behind him on the shelf without batting a lash.

Ezra and Pat exchanged poker-faced glances. "Then I'll have a stogy," the former suggested.

"Un-uh." The man shook his head sullenly. "Ain't a one left in the place—"

Pat glanced up at the flickering lamp, past which strands and layers of stale cigar smoke were even now slowly drifting.

"In other words," he said unemotionally, "there isn't anythin' at all for us here. Is that the story?"

The man stirred from one foot to the other, uneasily, conscious all the while that Pat was watching his hands. "Afraid not, stranger," he muttered. "Mind, I ain't presumin' to advise—but if I was you, I'd be on my way!"

Pat was grinning mirthlessly. "Look, friend. Tell Turk he's got a visitor—one that won't wait."

The man's quick blinking covered whatever reaction he experienced at the mention of that name, but he did not delay.

"Nobody here named—uh—Turk, whoever that is," he declared flatly.

"Oh, no? . . . Go out the back door an' whistle," Ezra snapped cynically. "I'll lay a little bet with yuh, pardner, whether a guy named Turk answers yuh or not!"

The man met his gaze stonily. "I don't know what you're talkin' about."

Pat guessed he was under stringent orders and would carry this as far as he could. Gazing coolly about the saloon, Stevens had his own way of dealing with such things.

"Two minutes, friend." His tone conveyed a flat ultimatum. "Then I take this place apart."

The answer was an obdurate stare. The man behind the bar did not move so much as a muscle, apparently prepared to wait this out, come what might. A slow minute dragged by, soundless and heavy. The deadlock seemed complete.

Turning slightly, Pat glanced over his shoulder toward Ezra, just as the big man's head came up, his nose hoisted with the alertness of a pointer.

"Hey! What'd that be, now?" exclaimed Ez, low.

From somewhere outside in the dark street came the steady, measured crunch of boots. More than one man, from the sound. Men making no attempt to mask their advance. Ezra slowly faced the door, wary and hard; but Pat did not take his scrutinizing glance away from the graven image back of the bar.

The heavy feet thumped on the steps, deliberate and sure, and a moment later three hard-eyed men shouldered in through the door. As if perfectly aware of what they intended to do, they advanced in a close group to the bar, pausing a scant six feet from the two friends, their flinty faces turned this way. They appeared to be cowmen, and probably were in the intervals of the more important business of their lives. Two at least were middle-aged, seasoned hands. All were heavily armed.

Ezra affected to look them over with contemptuous particularity. Well aware of the challenge in their mere presence here, he grasped the initiative with his customary cool decision.

"Here's the population now," he rumbled, in faint derision. "Must be a right neighborly country, if you're a prime sample!"

They met his look with bleak circumspection. They were not for an instant thrown off their objective by deliberate ridicule, and their glances ran past him to rest on Pat, whom they knew at once to be the dominant figure of this pair.

A granite-faced boy, with the ravaged look of a dissipated man, accosted Pat with hostile formality.

"What yuh after here?" His words rustled dryly in the heavy quiet.

Pat looked him over with chilling reserve. "Not you." The young fellow took a sliding step forward, followed closely by his confederates.

"Maybe I'll do, though—"

Pat delayed a stiff ten seconds before shaking his head decidedly.

"No."

Again the three slid forward an unobtrusive step, closing in. Ezra's craggy face went stern.

"There's nails in that next board," he said harshly, pointing down at their feet. "One more step—"

They took it, insolently cool. There was a rattlesnake blur at Ezra's side, and his gun roared hollowly in the low-ceiled bar. One of the trio opposite gave an instantaneous howl of wrath, dancing with the knifelike pain of a slug through his toes.

Without discernible pause, it set off an explosion of violence too rapid to follow, as every man in the place sprang into purposeful activity. The man Ezra had hit lunged into him with awkward force, hampering further play of his gun.

"That's the ticket! Now git the other one, Curt," one yelled.

The hard-faced boy—it was he who was called Curt—made a blundering, vicious rush for Pat. Evidently the preconcerted idea was to take them alive, for the fellow made a wild, bearlike grab of sweeping arms, not attempting to unlimber his weapon. He had nerve. But crouched low, he was at a distinct disadvantage. Pat's raised elbow crashed down on his head at the same instant that his lifting knee, driven with all the impetus of a rock-hard frame, smashed into the boy's midriff.

The young rough crumpled to the planks. Pat scuffed him aside in a twinkling, too busy so much as to glance down. Just then a thunderous detonation shook the place. Pat's hat flew off, but he was not hit. A flashing glance detected the sawed-off shotgun in the hands of the ratlike man behind the bar.

With a leap Pat dived bodily across it and pinned the treacherous marksman, one hand closing on the scrawny throat, the other forcing the lethal weapon down. They crashed toward the floor together, their combined weight toppling the unstable bar forward with a rusty screech of drawn nails.

The falling bar knocked the legs out from under one of Ezra's assailants, his gun clattering across the floor. Just at the moment the huge redhead was engaged in clawing the first of his attackers off his broad back. Like

a cougar the man clung there, viciously raking at the big fellow's face. It was not only exquisitely painful—it made Ezra royally mad. With a bellow, he leaned sharply forward, throwing the man over his head by sheer shift of weight.

Getting a grip on the leechlike renegade as his body rolled forward, Ezra plucked him off and flung him aside with a tremendous heave and bulge of sinews. Rolling and sliding, the man hurtled through the air to skid the length of the room, smashing chairs and toppling tables before bringing up solidly against the rear wall with a thump that shook the building.

Curt meanwhile had once more scrambled up, sixgun in hand. Across the wreckage of the bar, Pat saw him whirl toward Ezra with naked murder in his eyes.

"Look out, Ez!"

Ezra saw his peril barely in time. Too far away to reach the killer before the hammer fell, he displayed superb presence of mind, his beamlike arm sweeping around behind him in an arc. His hooked fingers encountering the remnant of a smashed chair, he scooped it up. Curt fired, but Ezra somehow miraculously contrived to avoid the slug. The thick, acrid smoke of gunfire already hazing the place, making it difficult to see anything clearly, must somewhat have abetted his purpose; and he never afforded the gunman the additional split-second of time necessary to draw a fatal bead.

The remains of the chair rose over his head and sped through the air in a flying arc. Curt ducked—too late. A fierce yelp escaped him as the jagged wood struck his arm with crushing force. The Colt clattered down, exploding harmlessly. Cursing with rage, Curt crouched for a moment clutching his shattered arm. If looks

could have killed, his would have slain the tall redhead where he stood. But instead, Ezra appeared only too ready to follow up his attack at a moment's notice.

Curt wheeled and ran stumbling from the bar, the white flash of his face at the door signifying utter defeat. Another of the renegades followed him.

Pat had already hauled his man roughly from behind the bar and cuffed him into cringing submission. The fellow wrenched free and started to crawl away, escape his only thought. The man whom Ezra had shot in the foot lay groaning against the wall. Nursing a cracked head, he had been out of the fight for several minutes.

“Wal—”

Ezra straightened alertly, pugnaciously ready to continue the combat—only to pause at a slight sound from the rear of the place. Pat whirled as well.

They found themselves staring into the saturnine face of Turk Marble, leaning with indolent ease in the frame of the rear door and smiling on them dourly.

10.

“WELL, TURK! How much does it take to smoke you out of your den?” Pat Stevens threw at the outlaw sharply.

Marble’s hooded eyes were sleepy. “It’s all accordin’ to how I’m feelin’—”

“So that’s it.” Pat was sententiously amused. “We

couldn't know, of course. Sorry we had to rough your boys up a bit."

"We'll just say the books are still open, Stevens!" There was a dangerous lack of warmth in the retort, and Pat studied the man briefly with thoughtful care.

"Easy does it, Marble. I don't aim," he murmured, "to take you back with me—at least not now. All I want is a little confab."

Turk's nonchalant nod revealed an equal composure. "I'll talk, Stevens—up to a point."

"I'm not so sure if talk'll be enough." Pat was moving in slowly now. "It can hardly escape yuh that I'm still on the trail of that bank loot."

Marble's headshake was positive. "I never got it, man! Yuh know that."

Pat grinned at him coolly.

"You didn't happen to have it on yuh, you mean, when we—last discussed the matter. But since then, Marble, I've come along a little further. You were paid off—"

Turk's frozen immobility said that he was shaken by the sudden introduction of this gambit. "Give me that again," he got out harshly.

"Oh no." Pat's grin was a shade less friendly. "We won't mention names; I'm not specially interested in small fry. But I'll take it on reasonable proof that the money in your pants right now smells of Powder Valley."

The renegade was fully cognizant at last of Stevens's real meaning. He seemed to scent danger and, like a wild stallion, to sheer away from it.

"Don't draw no mistaken notions, Stevens, from what yuh may think yuh know," he said fiercely.

Pat could be just as hard, at considerably less expenditure of outward show. "I won't need to, old boy," he assured Marble softly. "Not in your case, anyhow!"

If such a resolution could be said to wilt, Turk's swiftly underwent a subtle change suggestive of that process. "Wal—" He was almost gloomy. "I never was able t' satisfy myself the business would work. I just ain't built for no hole-an'-corner way of operatin'—"

"Yuh mean," Pat prodded gently, "that bank job *was* rigged, before you and your men ever rode into Dutch Springs!"

"I do, eh?" If Pat anticipated a violent denial, he was surprised by its absence. Turk only stared at him, grimly taciturn. Stevens allowed something of his astonishment to creep into his face.

"By your silence, you're pointin' a finger square at Ab Keeler," he exclaimed sharply. "I don't believe it!"

Marble showed his teeth mirthlessly. "Well, well! So there *is* somethin' yuh don't know," he taunted lightly.

Both knew that Pat's efforts were directed toward another quarter. But if he had hoped in this manner to elicit further admissions from the outlaw, he seemed doomed to disappointment.

"Turk," Pat pointed out levelly. "Maybe yuh did get that bank money—maybe not. It must occur to yuh that your word don't carry much weight with the law. For just as long as you clam up, you're putting your friend Jap in a position no man could be asked to like."

Marble's mouth opened slightly. "How so?"

Pat clamped down now with unexpected abruptness. "Jap *was* in that stick-up, wasn't he?"

"Wal . . . yuh might call him the middleman,"

Marble admitted warily. "I seem to disremember exactly, whether he was there at the time—"

"Jap *could* have made off with that currency, between the bank and the time we caught up with *yuh*," insisted Pat. "Don't *yuh* get it, Marble? That's where your story falls down."

Turk shook a dour denial. "No, it don't," he argued stubbornly.

"It will. If I decide to take Jap in, and he's persuaded to talk, you can see where that leaves you all."

"Not if he tells the truth!"

"Oh, yes. The truth—"

But Marble stoutly insisted on this, against all probability. "I know Jap," he admitted. "But you don't seem to, Stevens. What *yuh'll* find in his pocket is peanuts—an' no more. I know what you're hopin'. But," he ended sardonically, "if you're really huntin' for the goat, don't go no fu'ther. You're lookin' at him!"

Pat turned this over without haste, weighing its many implications.

"Get Jap in here," he directed shortly. "I'll talk to him."

"Un-uh." Marble seemed ready for him now at every turn. "If you'd been watchin' as close as I thought, you'd have seen him ridin' away—"

Pat's glance strayed to Ezra, who shrugged. Once his purpose was served here, it was not at all unlikely that Kershaw had slipped away under cover of darkness.

"It won't do, Marble." Pat eyed the cool outlaw sternly. "You seem to be a smooth enough article. But I'll lay hands on that money, if it's over your body!"

Turk's round, smooth face flushed darkly with sudden, violent blood. He blew up with angry heat.

"Dammit, Stevens! You and me'll tangle yet if yuh won't leave a man alone! . . . I was crossed, I tell yuh. I expected to get that cash myself—and I don't like it. But I can't help yuh!"

This seemed plain enough. Marble voiced a blank mystery in relation to the vanished money, which he was absolutely opposed to elucidating further. Spoken in anger as his words were, they appeared, moreover, to confirm a deep suspicion which strengthened in Pat's mind with the passing hours.

"It's all mighty peculiar," he declared artlessly. "You're drawin' a bead square at some man or other, right there in Dutch Springs—the closer to the bank, the better. But for my money, Marble, Ab Keeler's out. Yuh might as well ask me to suspect Jeb Winters—or Dude Buell!"

If Turk's nerves had been shaken by this talk, they failed to betray a tremor at the introduction of that name. It warned Pat again of the caliber of the man with whom he had to deal. Had Buell himself proved as stalwart, his integrity might, in spite of everything, never have been seriously questioned.

"Don't ask me to go too far, Stevens," Marble warned, doggedly. "I'll take a leaf from yore own book. I ain't namin' no names—nor sayin' any more than I already have. If yuh think there's anythin' shady to figure out, go ahead!"

Pat's nod was absent, his thoughts roving back and forth over recent events. "I still haven't figured out," he said musingly, "whatever it was you might have had against Al Henshew—"

Turk's response to this was more or less according to expectation. "Al who—? Oh, yuh mean that flea-trap

hombre. Why—" He opened his mouth to speak, and shut it again. "What makes yuh think we had anythin' t' do with that?"

"Well, it didn't make sense." Pat's manner was light. "If it had been you, I'd have asked myself if that little business wasn't intended to throw suspicion *away* from the guilty parties."

Marble's scrutiny was suddenly penetrating. "You're keen at that, Stevens," he muttered gruffly. "Hope it don't end up by gettin' yuh over yore head!"

They sparred a moment or two longer. But the outlaw's growing restlessness made plain that the limit of his tolerance was hard-pressed.

"You an' yore friend showed sand in comin' here," he observed, in a tone of covert advice. "But this ain't my bailiwick, Stevens. The boys'll be growin' impatient—"

Pat's smile was indulgent. "Not that yuh could blame 'em a lot. And we wouldn't want that to happen, would we?"

They exchanged steady looks. Even to Ezra it was evident that these two understood each other in a manner obscure to himself.

"Dang it all, Stevens! We got this setup by the tail," protested Ez bluffly. "Yuh ain't pullin' outa here on this feller's say-so?"

"Just to persuade Marble of our good faith." Pat nodded. "I haven't signed any papers contractin' not to come back. But maybe it won't be necessary," he added meaningfully.

Turk looked at once hopeful and obscurely relieved. "You're gettin' wise, Stevens," he said. "I'll never wish

nobody no bad luck—but if I don't see yuh again, it'll be all right!"

Pat laughed, turning away. "You may've done me a good turn at that, Marble," he tossed over his shoulder. "Be funny if it turned out you'd done yourself one at the same time, wouldn't it?"

The outlaw found no answer for this ambiguous remark, but stood stolidly watching them as they took their leave.

Cascade lay gravelike in black and silver shadow under the early moon as Pat and Ezra stepped into the silent street. It would have surprised neither to find their ponies missing, but the animals stood where they had been left. They mounted and jogged easily in the direction of home, passing out of the village unmolested and indeed, it seemed, unnoticed as well.

"Jest how much did yuh take, Stevens, from all o' Turk Marble's smooth double-talk—if anythin'?" demanded Ezra critically as the wall of pines closed behind them.

"More than he thought he was givin' out," Pat returned confidently.

Ezra changed position restlessly in his saddle. "I still think yuh handled that bunch too easy," he proclaimed, his manner professing his total dissatisfaction with the meager results of their sortie.

Pat was willing enough to humor him. "In what way, Ez?"

"Wal, for instance! We had Marble an' Jap cornered there in the street awhile ago," Ezra reminded Pat argumentatively. "We could've grabbed 'em both!"

"No, I don't think so. Not without risk of having to down one or the other. I want Jap alive and kicking—"

"An' now he's gone ag'in."

"Good and rattled, too, if I'm any judge," Pat seconded cheerfully. "Gettin' closer all the time to his big mistake, Ez—don't forget that. And that's when we'll nab him."

Ezra declined any responsibility for this brand of reasoning. "Wal, there yuh was—dickerin' all around Hell's Half Acre t' pry a little scrappy information outa Marble," he proceeded hardily. "Why not jest slap it out of him, same as them other fellers, an' be done with it?"

"No, yuh don't get it, Ez." Pat was markedly patient with him. "Turk's a hard nut—few harder. To try that would be to risk drivin' him out of the country altogether."

Ezra gathered his forces for a sarcastic blast, only to sidetrack this as a fresh thought struck him. "Wal—comin' right down to it," he persisted. "What *is* he hangin' around for? A fool could tell him he's washed up here as far as his kind o' game goes—"

Pat was smiling. "You've hit it. That's precisely what he doesn't realize he's givin' away! It means more than enough to me, I can tell you. I *want* him to stick around. In fact, it may be necessary to lure him back into Powder Valley again, before we clean this business up for good."

"Humph!" It was all Greek to Ezra. Literal-minded as he was, he summoned the good sense to ignore a puzzle he had not the penetration to solve. "We ridin' all night, Stevens, or shall we haul up an' grab some shut-eye?"

"We can do that. We've earned it."

After crossing the pass a mile above Cascade, they dropped down to a lower level and, turning off the trail, worked a way into the pines. A parklike swale afforded water and graze for the ponies; and Jap Kershaw's cabin on Horseshoe Creek once more supplied their scanty meal.

Pink-streaked dawn saw them once more on their way. A two hours' ride found them overlooking Powder Valley, far below. When they reached the Tumbling K ranch road, Pat turned into it without comment. Ezra hauled up to look his surprise.

"What *yuh* headin' in there for?" he demanded.

Pat was similarly brief. "Borrowed this bronc from old Kyle—"

Ezra looked at the horse as if seeing it for the first time. "Holy smoke! *Yuh* borrowed a Tumblin' K nag t' go after Jap Kershaw? . . . Sometimes I wonder if *yuh* just got gall, or if you're simpler than *yuh* seem!"

Pat could not help chuckling. "Well, I needed a pony. And I was careful to get Kyle over a barrel, so to speak, before askin' him for it."

Nearing the ranch in the bottom of Trap Canyon, they rode warily. If Jap had gravitated home he would be on the ranch now, whatever story he might have given his father. But they need not have troubled themselves. Only Kyle was in evidence as they turned into the ranch yard, not even Will putting in an appearance.

The rancher emerged from a shed, halting abruptly at sight of them, his keen glance searching Pat's face almost with dread.

"What now, Stevens?" he rumbled huskily.

"Brought your bronc back." Pat was matter-of-fact, glancing about. "Where's Jap? Didn't he come home?"

"Wal, he did—yes. But he's gone again."

"You knew I wanted to talk with Jap," Pat accused quietly.

Kershaw's uneasiness appeared to increase. "Then yuh didn't come across him—"

"Not yet."

"That's queer," Kyle managed, as if uncertain what to say. "He—come down the canyon this mornin'. I warned him against hangin' around town."

Pat's nod was noncommittal. "I may run into him yet." His interest in the subject appeared to lapse. "Maybe you'll let me have a fresh horse, Kyle. I'll leave it at the livery in town—"

The rancher was quick to provide this small accommodation. It was as though he could not do enough in the effort to propitiate Pat, though his tongue failed him. Stevens and Ezra were on their way in a few minutes, the latter glancing back before they passed around a bend. Kyle was still watching, a hand shading his eyes.

"Kershaw knows," commented Ez shrewdly. "He's plenty concerned for that no-good son o' his! Gits me to wonderin' if he don't know more'n we think—"

"I got that, too." Pat nodded. "On the other hand, don't forget that we've been away a day, Ez. There may be something waitin' for us."

He was right, and they were scarcely surprised when it turned out to be something which neither had expected.

They were emerging from the mouth of Trap Canyon, not far from the boundary of Pat's Lazy Mare

range, when a slug zipped close between them, to strike a rock and whine wickedly away. The belated crack of the rifle followed.

"That come from them rocks yonder," Ezra whipped out, drawing his gun. "C'mon, Pat! They're makin' a shootin' gallery out o' yore Spring Creek range, but we'll stop that!"

Sweeping apart, they pounded across the grassy bottoms at considerable further risk of gunfire, but without being hit. An ominous silence held the high jumble of rocks as they closed in on either side. Then a man stepped into the open, rifle at the ready. Pat knew him. It was Cap Downs, a grizzled Lazy Mare puncher. His face went blank as he recognized his employer.

"That you, Stevens?" he ejaculated gruffly. "My mistake. Thought I was tanglin' with them Kershaws again!"

"Again?" Pat stared sharply.

"Sure. I come joggin' over here this mornin' to see if Kyle's Tumblin' K stock was stickin' close to the creek. Johnson's orders. All of a sudden, *wham!* Somebody starts smokin' me aplenty—"

"Trying to drive you off, eh?"

"Drive, hell! He was tryin' t' down me," Cap replied heatedly. "He almost done it, too!"

"Why didn't you haul out of there?"

The puncher's look was scornful. "On what?" he countered briefly. "Jap shot my bronc! M' saddle's in the rock here now. I didn't have no choice, Pat. Took to the rocks till Kershaw an' his brother drifted, an' I sure thought you was them, comin' back to finish the job!"

“What time was this, Cap?”

Downs shrugged. “Seven o’clock. Around there.”

“And you’re positive it was Will and Jap?”

“Take m’ oath, Stevens!”

He had more to say, but that was the story. Pat and Ezra glanced at each other, the latter scowling portentously.

“No wonder Kyle was jumpy jest now,” he exclaimed pointedly. “Lib Haley warned that trouble’d come from this setup—an’, Stevens, it sure looks like the Kershaws are tryin’ their best t’ slap the old double-cross brand onto yuh!”

11.

PAT WAS FORCED to concede that it looked remarkably like a bold attempt at range-grabbing. He was utterly unable to fathom Will’s part in the affair. Peppery as the boy was, he was made of different stuff from his brother Jap. Could a seasoned hand like Downs be mistaken?

“We’ll get to town,” he said. “If somebody drifts in here, Cap, don’t try to start a war. I’ll send somebody out with a horse for yuh—”

“But, hang it all, Stevens!” Ezra was violent. “Yuh simply can’t pass this over!”

“No. I don’t expect to,” Pat assured him coldly. “Jap’ll explain—or crawl. I just want it left to me.”

Downs had known Pat long enough to understand that he meant what he said. After a few minutes more of talk they started off, leaving the puncher to wait.

"It all looks screwy t' me," grumbled Ezra as they rode. "Kershaw's usin' yore water an' grass now. What did he hope t' gain by this rough stuff?"

"I think I get it," Pat returned deliberately. "If I'm right, you're in for a shock, Ez. But time'll tell."

Less than a mile from town, the lanky redhead gazed forward fixedly, his one eye slitted.

"Somebody foggin' this way," he announced. "At a right smart clip, too—"

Pat made out at a glance that it was no man who came racing toward them, followed by a banner of dust. The gleam of the girl's shining red mare in the morning sun identified Libby Haley long before she came within hail. Her face foretold that she bore momentous news.

"Pat!" she exclaimed, hauling in with a scatter of dirt. "Thank heaven, I've found you—!"

He was at her bridle swiftly, steadying the blowing mare. "What is it, Libby?" Haste made him curt. "Not—?"

She may have gathered his unspoken meaning. At any rate she did not leave him long in the dark. "It's Keno and Shoshone Thompson," she supplied quickly. "They were sprung from the jail this morning, and have both disappeared!"

Given her horrified enunciation, it sounded sufficiently grave. But Pat perceptibly relaxed. "So that's it," he grunted. He paused then. "Who did it? Did they find out?"

"I don't know! But," the girl almost wailed, "I'm afraid Will and Jap Kershaw are being blamed—"

Even Ezra pricked up his ears at this. "That don't make sense—" he began gruffly. Pat closed him off with a curt gesture.

"Is anything bein' done about it?" Pat tossed at Libby, sharply.

"Not yet." Her eyes revealed her very real concern. "But Dad seems wholly unable to stop the loose talk—"

"An' where were you headin'?" Ezra asked her flatly.

She seemed stoutly indignant. "To my knowledge, Will, at least, wasn't even in town! I was going straight to the Tumbling K to warn him." There was a touch of defiance in her conclusion.

"He isn't there, either—or wasn't." Pat thought swiftly. "But I'd go on anyway, Libby. You may find him, and it's certainly a sensible idea. If you'll wait while Ezra picks up an extra bronc, he'll go with yuh. It'd be smart to have him along, just in case."

Her acceptance of the offer was not delayed. "But you'll stand by Will—if he should turn up there in Dutch Springs?" she begged.

"Don't worry."

It was so arranged, the girl going on at a walk, while Ezra and Pat shoved their horses hurriedly toward town. Once they arrived, Pat saw that the big fellow got a mount from the livery for Cap Downs before he turned away.

"Stick close to that girl and keep her out of trouble. Will, too, if yuh can manage it," was his parting shot as Ezra started off.

Striding thoughtfully toward Sheriff Haley's office in

the jail, Stevens had an idea of the interview facing him. He was less prepared for the roar Brad let out when he looked up from his desk to see Pat standing in the door.

"Where in time yuh been, Stevens?" he hurled at the other in wrathful disgust.

"In the hills." Pat might have dredged up a far more effective retort had he chosen, but contented himself with the simple statement of fact. "What's the story on this jail-break, anyhow?"

"Know about it, do yuh? Too bad yuh wasn't here! . . . Two men were seen prowlin' round the jail this mornin' early." Haley spun out the tale as if by rote. "They were recognized. It must've been Jap who slammed Kin Martin over the noggin and took his keys. Anyway, Stevens, he let Shoshone and Keno out. An' whether or not it was Will Kershaw, waitin' with the hosses, they all four got clear away before Martin was found."

Haley's usual geniality altered subtly to a look almost of sullen dislike. "So that's what's been goin' on while yuh was out in the hills—lookin' for Jap!"

Quietly Pat withdrew the deputy's badge from his pocket and laid it on the desk before Libby's father.

"Okay, Haley. That's the way you want it, isn't it?" he inquired softly.

"Wal, it ain't only me," Haley said doggedly. "But people are talkin', Stevens. It's gettin' to the point where they demand action!"

Even as he spoke it became evident that he was somehow relieved, and he was careful to say nothing contradicting Pat's supposition that he would no longer be of practical use as a deputy sheriff.

"All right, Brad. We'll leave it this way." Pat nodded. "And then everybody will be happy."

Haley peered at him, arrested. Aware of the hidden barb in Pat's talk, it may have occurred to him that his alacrity in accepting the resignation might appear conspicuous, for he could not resist a delayed thrust in return.

"Ain't missin' any chance to duck a whack at them Kershaws, are yuh?" he growled crossly. "It was bound t' be noticed in the end, Stevens—"

Pat was on him in a flash.

"Meanin' just what, Haley?" he queried, stepping close, his face gone cold.

"Meanin' it won't do to be friends with that pair," Brad answered stubbornly, though his eyes dropped, "while they're known to've yanked outlaws out of jail!"

Pat shook a slow, conclusive denial. "You can't make it stick, Haley. Will and Jap never sprung those boys. I know!"

Fright peeped out of the lawman's pupils, to fade as quickly. He knew how to summon authoritative assurance to his aid at a moment's notice.

"Go ahead! Ask this town t' believe that," he scoffed.

"I'll shove it down their throats if necessary," Pat snapped. "Because I happen to know where the Kershaws were this mornin', Brad. They were miles from here—with one of my punchers to prove it!"

But Haley was apparently not to be convinced by anything Pat could produce in the way of an alibi. "Keep that attitude," he muttered warningly, "an' I'll be forced t' conclude I'm well shut of yuh as an assistant, Stevens. Meanwhile, I'll have my own questions to

put to the Kershaws, soon as I can lay hands on them!"

Pat stared at him for a moment, then shrugged. "In that case, there's little more to be said." He was his old cool self once more, faintly satirical. "I won't say good-by, Haley, because I'm afraid you'll be seein' me from time to time."

The sheriff snorted, but Pat did not wait for whatever retort he might find to hurl. He turned on his heel and strode out of the jail. At no point had he bothered to argue with Haley, and this had been by design, the sum of what he had learned from the interview only tending further to confirm previously held suspicions.

As he entered the street, he almost fell over Sam Sloan, leaning against the wall outside in an attitude of patient waiting. The little man met him with a snag-toothed grin.

"So yuh got the can, eh?" he jibed genially. "Oh, I was listenin'—long 'nough t' learn that much. Good thing, too. Mebby now we'll be seein' yuh around once in a while. Seen Ez?"

Pat acquainted him with recent events as they moved up the street. "Haley thinks he's got rid of me—but yuh can't fire a man workin' partly for himself," he concluded easily, stopping before the bank. "Ab Keeler should be here now. Let's step inside for a gab with him."

Entering the lobby, they saw that the sizable group of ranchers and local businessmen who had been gathering here daily since the robbery had at last thinned out. Art Bickle glanced through a wicket at them with some annoyance, but did not bother to speak.

Through the ground-glass partition of his cubicle,

Pat saw the rotund bank president perspiring at his desk, a damp bandana tucked inside his collar. Pat started that way, only to be halted as he was pushing through the gate.

“You can’t come in here, Stevens!” a curt voice reprimanded. It was Art Bickle, severe and authoritative, blocking Pat’s passage with stubborn disfavor.

Pat only smiled at him. “Yes, I can, Art. Remember me, don’t yuh? I’m Pat Stevens—with a word or two for Ab’s ear—”

Flushing under this gentle raillery, the cashier would have put up an argument. But Keeler glimpsed Pat, and with characteristic shortness of manner he waved him in, ignoring Bickle.

“Come on, Stevens. Step in and sit,” Ab invited wheezily. “That Sam with yuh, too? . . . Come in, both of yuh. What’re yuh waitin’ for?”

Bickle found no choice save to withdraw with as much injured dignity as he could muster.

Ab looked over his glasses at Pat as the latter sank into a leather-covered chair. “They’re talkin’ about yuh out there, boy.” He waved toward the street.

Pat’s brows elevated slightly. “Oh—yuh mean because I never caught Jap?” He smiled. “I wasn’t particularly tryin’ to, Ab. But no matter. As it happens, I was enjoyin’ a much more interestin’ talk.”

Keeler appeared engrossed in his fingernails. “What could that be, now—”

“I was—” Pat threw his bomb coolly—“discussin’ the bank haul personally with Turk Marble.”

Obese as he was, the white-haired banker nearly bounced out of his chair. His pale eyes bugged out

glassily, a pink flush stealing under his smooth white skin. "Yuh say yuh talked it over—with *Marble*?" he gasped.

Pat only nodded once, corroboratively, his grey eyes steady. Keeler gradually recovered his aplomb.

"Dang it, Stevens! Yuh always proved able to take good care of yoreself," he burst out admiringly. "I dunno why folks go right on doubtin' yuh." His pudgy fingers drummed on the glass desk top nervously. Plainly he dreaded to put his next, vital question. "Wal! What was *Marble*'s yarn?"

Pat sat forward in his chair.

"Turk declares he never carried a dollar of your money out of this bank," he stated. "And, Ab, I'm inclined to believe him!"

A worried look crept into Keeler's small eyes. He shook his head slowly, studying Pat's lips in patent disbelief. "I never expected *you'd* let me down—"

"Don't take me wrong," Pat warned. "I'm quite willing to believe the money's gone. And, Ab—the quickest way to get it back is to find out where it actually went. Right?"

The banker followed him attentively, but his puzzlement failed to lessen materially, even now. "I don't get it," he complained. "A known outlaw breaks in my bank here, an' busts out shootin'. An' twenty-odd thousand dollars turns up missin' . . . I may not be bright, Stevens, an' I *am* feelin' my age some. But are yuh meanin' seriously to tell me there's no real connection between them two events?"

Even Sam could not help laughing over his vehement incredulity.

"You're talkin' sense, all right," Pat chuckled quietly. "Offhand, it's perfectly natural that any man should see the thing in just that way . . . Ever stop to realize," he demanded shrewdly, "it could just be that somebody was makin' sure you'd be no exception?"

Keeler's jaw dropped, his pale brow corrugated. "Yuh mean—" He struggled with the incongruous thought Pat had implanted in his unreceptive mind. "Yuh ain't sayin' that stickup was—jest a blind?"

Pat nodded his approval. "I thought you'd get it. That's just what I *am* tryin' to get over, Ab. Let it sink in for a minute before you start blowin'," he concluded laughingly.

"But—but—"

Keeler slumped in his chair, his hefty bulk sagging. "Hang it, Stevens! You're hintin' now at an inside job—and a particularly nasty one to boot," he protested weakly. "I can't make nothin' else out of yore talk!"

Pat stared at him thoughtfully, asking himself if the aging banker was after all to prove a stumbling-block in the course of action he strove to map out.

"Do you think for a minute that such a thing is impossible?" he rapped out bluntly.

"Wal, but—" Ab fumbled his way forward, at a loss. "Don't yuh see? Such a scheme simply *couldn't* work—without the connivance of either Art or me!" To him, this seemed to settle the question finally and conclusively.

Pat's nod was markedly grim. "I see it, all right. And, Keeler, I long ago satisfied myself about you." He paused, to go on again in a colorless tone. "How long have yuh known Bickle?"

"Art? Fifteen years." A flush returned to Ab's pudgy cheeks as he answered.

"Like him?"

"Wal, if we're gettin' personal," the banker growled doggedly, "I hate his guts! He's never took an order in all these years without grumblin' . . . But I'd as soon suspicion him of stealin', Stevens, as I would my maiden aunt!"

They were speaking in low tones; and while Sam Sloan, to whom all this was new and sufficiently startling, took it in with ears on the stretch, he did not neglect to keep an eye on Bickle, over the top of the glass enclosure. The dour cashier was likewise all ears; but, hampered by distance, and the distraction of customers appearing at the wickets, it was doubtful if he caught so much as a word of what was being said, despite his curiosity.

"I know how *yuh* feel," Pat was telling the banker mildly. "It's logical you should, after working with a man so long. But harking back to your own words, Ab—it's either you or him!"

Keeler growled deep in his barrel chest. "Sure of that, are *yuh*?"

Pat assented cheerfully. "As sure as I am that Turk Marble would never be in this country now if he'd collared that haul—"

Wrestling with the contending forces of doubt and habitual faith, Ab wore a thunderous scowl of concentrated thought. "I've known *yuh* a long while, Stevens. But this is like lightnin' out of the blue," he declared at length. "Give me one reason why *yuh* reckon I've cause to doubt my trusted employee for so much as a minute!"

Pat delayed, his gaze slitted. At last he nodded, his face clearing.

"All right, Ab. It so happens that I can give yuh somethin' you saw yourself . . . Got here a few minutes late, the morning of the robbery, didn't yuh?"

Ab admitted as much.

"And what was the first thing you saw?" pressed Pat.

"Why—uh—"

"—Art Bickle standin' there in the door," Pat supplied for him. "Correct?"

"Yeh." Keeler's eyes assumed a far-away vagueness. "That's right, Stevens. He was."

"And how was he dressed?" Pat put the query casually.

Ab failed to follow, his brows lifting. "Why, same as always," he grunted readily. "White shirt—an' them black sleeve-guards he wears—"

"You've got it!" Pat pounced on him in a twinkling. "That's just how he *was* dressed, Keeler. I saw it, too . . . And now go back to his story. It's simple enough. He unlocked the door—*he* says—and stepped smack into the barrel of a sixgun pointed at his belly. With that starin' him in the face, he opened the vault as ordered—and two minutes later, those outlaws were shooting their way up-street and out of town . . . Just when, during that time," he broke off to inquire softly, "would you say Mister Cashier Bickle found time to take off his coat and slip on those wrist protectors that he keeps here in the bank?"

It would have been difficult to record the swift changes which played over Ab Keeler's dismayed face as he listened. Without a word, he swiveled slowly

around in his chair and stared hard at his cashier, innocently busy at the moment on the other side of the glass partition.

Knowing full well the effect he had intentionally created, Pat rose to his feet casually. "So there yuh are, Ab. Think it over." His tone was cursory. "No need of bein' hasty about this, of course—and I'll ask one small favor of yuh."

Manifestly jarred, Keeler stared at him dazedly, anger and incredulity lingering on his normally placid countenance. "What's that?" he growled.

"Eyes open. Mouth shut." Pat winked at him lightly. "We'll know more about this before we get done. And I'll keep yuh posted. Is it a deal?"

The banker's assent was almost a groan.

12.

ART BICKLE glowered hostilely after them as Pat and Sam Sloan sauntered out of the bank. Sam had the wit to conceal any particular interest in the man, but once in the street, he turned to Pat with concern.

"Yuh got his measure to a pig bristle, Stevens," the little man muttered. "But that hombre smells a large-sized rat, or I'm a Chinaman!"

Pat's sobriety of mien was proof that the warning was not altogether wasted.

"Could be," he conceded. "He's in too deep now to help himself, Sam."

"Wal, I hope Ab shows enough savvy not t' tip yore hand—"

"If I know Keeler, he'll just about bust. But he'll hold fast," predicted Pat.

Standing on the boardwalk they talked it over a moment or two longer in lowered tones. Finally Sam started away.

"Where to?" Stevens called after him.

"I'll be busy for half an hour." Sloan waved a hand backward. "Ain't leavin' town, are yuh? Yuh'll see me around."

Pat strolled up-street to pause before the hotel, and presently seated himself on the steps. He had plenty to roll over in his mind, starting from the adventure in Cascade, if not earlier.

He could have taken Turk Marble in custody there had he deemed such a course advisable, but the outlaw was proving more valuable as an unhampered source of information. Studying this, Pat recalled the other man's reaction to Al Henshew's name. Hadn't Marble's cryptic comments amounted to a tip to the effect that the hotelman would bear watching? Pat weighed the probabilities—not overlooking Henshew's wrathy visit to Sheriff Haley. He had felt at the time that the interview was somehow aimed at himself. It was hardly Henshew's fault, or Haley's, if the effort had missed fire. The conviction grew on Pat now that Henshew had his share in the secret web overspreading Dutch Springs.

Conning this, with pursed lips, he happened to glance up in time to see Bickle, the cashier, hurrying

out of the bank. It was so unusual to see Art out of the building during banking hours that the circumstance held him arrested.

Bickle glanced hurriedly up and down the street, his manner preoccupied. He did not see Stevens, but, hastening diagonally across, wasted no time in slipping into Dude Buell's rather flashy real-estate office. Pat's brows rose, and he rubbed the back of his neck briskly. To his knowledge, Ab Keeler had never made a practice of soliciting business from anyone; assuredly no exception would be made in the case of a man whom Ab, in common with other local businessmen, did not particularly fancy.

It could only mean that Art's business with Buell was personal. Sitting there, Pat would have wagered a high stake that he could guess with fair accuracy what it was.

"Sam was right," he reflected bleakly. "Bickle didn't need no telegram to bring him the bad news! If this spells the gathering of the clan—and it looks very much like it—I'll be forced to watch my step from here on out."

As he waited for the cashier to reappear, his glance shifted. A sudden stiffening held him motionless for several seconds, what he saw fetching a grunt out of him.

Barging out of the high board gate of the public corral at the other end of town, where he must have left his bronc, Jap Kershaw came shambling up the middle of the street, moving neither fast nor slow, but with a kind of dogged steadiness which spelled trouble.

"Oh-oh!" Pat muttered, his eyes slitting. "Jap's on the prod—"

Arriving opposite the jail, Jap halted to face that

way, hurling his heady defiance in through the open door. Too distant to catch any of the words, Pat was little surprised when he received no answer, the doorway of the jail office remaining empty and silent. If he was there, and listening, Brad Haley wanted no part of Jap now.

After an insultingly deliberate wait, Jap turned and came on. It was as if he had determined once and for all to bluff this town to a standstill. Hurling crusty epithets at the few men in sight, he was carrying a big chip on his shoulder. Bony hand swinging beside his sagging holster, rocky jaw outthrust, he was issuing a deliberate challenge which Dutch Springs prudently declined to accept.

Starting crisply back to the bank just as Jap came abreast, Art Bickle happened to glance up. Their glances crossed—and for an instant Bickle must have thought his time had come. Horror written on his thin acidulous face, he shrank back out of the way. Except to sweep the pasty cashier with a brief and contemptuous glance, however, Jap ignored the other. He had already spied Pat, seated motionless on the hotel steps as if waiting.

Jap's stride slowed; and though his advance did not falter, he gave the effect of increased wariness. Pat's unwavering scrutiny swung to keep pace with him. Ten feet away, in the center of the dust-churned street, Jap halted.

“Wal, Stevens—!” he got out thickly, his craggy features congested.

Pat only continued to watch with a narrow, impersonal interest, his lips unstirring.

"Anything t' say?" Jap bawled, suddenly and violently. He was rendered distinctly uneasy under the mounting pressure of this heavy silence.

Stevens's slow nod was far from reassuring. "Yeh, Kershaw." The words rustled with ominous mildness. "I do have."

"Yuh ain't wearin' that deputy's badge," Jap jerked out abruptly, in a sneer. "Savin' it t' scare folks like my old man?" Clearly he strove to goad Pat into anger.

"Lower your voice!" rapped Pat, hard and quick as the ring of steel. "I'll take no back talk from you—sucker!"

It slowed Jap to a blinking halt. He got hold of himself almost at once. "Talkin' big, huh?" he attempted to bluster, gruffly. "Let's hear jest how big yuh aim to act!"

Pat's withering smile was acid. "Yuh won't need tellin', Kershaw. Not that I blame yuh for gettin' rattled—you and your sucker friends!"

The repetition of that scornful word rang a bell in Jap's brain. But if his flush deepened to scarlet, he gave no other immediate sign that the thrust had found a vulnerable mark.

"What yuh drivin' at?" he asked irritably, with sharpened alertness.

Pat gave him the benefit of a cool grin. "Maybe you ain't heard that you're supposed to've sprung Keno and Shoshone out of jail—"

"It's a lie!" flashed Jap, almost before Pat had ceased speaking.

"Ah—but it's nice to be given credit for these capers," replied Pat derisively. "At least, you know yuh don't

have to be bothered disposing of awkward burdens, like those owlhoots—or that bank loot, shall we say?"

Kershaw looked ready to go off the handle at a moment's notice. "Damn yuh, Stevens!" he choked furiously. "What've yuh got in yore mind!"

"Marble admits he was double-crossed," Pat tossed back flatly. "When are you goin' to wise up?"

This kind of talk, at once so knowing and so guarded, was more than enough to make Jap cautious. "Yore talk'd make sense, Stevens—if there was anythin' in it!" he sparred defensively.

Pat shrugged. "All right—go ahead. Play a sucker's game. You seem to like it!"

Jap exploded. "Nobody makes a sucker out of me or Marb—" He stopped abruptly, grinding his teeth. "I don't know what you're talkin' about," he amended doggedly, his shifty glance malevolent.

"I know. You *were* paid off." Pat nodded, pretending to ignore the switch of emphasis. "Just enough to make yuh keep your trap shut, probably. I've Turk's word for it," he let drop indifferently, "that what I'd find in your pocket would only be peanuts—"

Jap's manner for the past few minutes had shown unmistakably his growing suspicion, which Pat had effectively planted, that he and his friends had been badly used. Stevens's next words, revealing his knowledge of much the other thought buried in deepest secrecy, did nothing to improve the situation.

"So what do yuh do, Kershaw? Come back to ask for more—or to pull some more chestnuts out of the fire for the big wheels?"

Fear etched its lines into Jap's hard face as he felt

these merciless allusions probing dangerously close to the bitter truth.

"You're talkin' in riddles!" he burst out, in desperation. "I'll tell yuh what I'm here for! I tried t' scare up that chicken sheriff, an' couldn't. But you're his helper—or was! If I'm accused of jail-breakin', Stevens, now's the time to make it stick!"

Manifestly he expected this thrown gauntlet to produce fireworks. He had whipped himself to the pitch of violent action.

Pat took the wind out of him with a casual head-shake. "You've been accused all right, Kershaw. But not by me—" The grimly amused tone of this denied any backdown.

Jap suffered a check, puzzlement crawling into his bloodshot eyes. "Yuh know better—huh?"

Pat nodded. "I happen to know what you *were* up to this morning, Jap." His tone was colorless. "Maybe," he went on with increasing gentleness, "you care to explain that!"

Kershaw swallowed hard, suddenly having trouble with his breathing. "Yuh still don't make sense!" he flared, maneuvering for any random delay.

"Maybe not. But *you'd* better," retorted Pat sharply. "Yuh've done your blowin', Kershaw. You can start addin' up right now—or I may send Cap Downs himself to inquire why you were throwin' lead at him!"

He rose as he spoke, stamping his pants legs down. If the act carried him a step or two nearer Kershaw, he appeared not to notice. The menace in his manner carried its own message.

Jap's nervousness increased as he wet his lips. "You're

over my head, Stevens," he insisted pertinaciously. "It must've been somebody else—"

"Then pass this along to him," Pat rasped, quick as lightning. Before his intention could be divined, he stepped close to the other and planted a solid blow alongside Jap's jaw. With a loud and meaty smack, it dumped Jap abruptly in the dust.

Astonishment and rage chased across Kershaw's alarmed face. Propped on his outthrust arms, he glared up at Stevens wickedly.

"I won't take it from *yuh*! Nobody does that to me," he said huskily, with suppressed force.

Pat only watched him narrowly from between lazily slit lids. Any attempt then by Jap to draw his gun would have spelled his death. Instead, flushed cholerically, he started to scramble up.

Pat let him partially regain his feet. Then a sweeping kick knocked Jap's legs out from under him again, at the same instant that a rock-hard fist struck him flush in the ear. With a groan, Kershaw smashed down heavily, to roll over and lie half-stunned. He made a weak attempt to struggle up, but it failed. Falling back, he peered fearfully at Stevens with fogged pupils.

"Worse'll catch up with *yuh*, mister, next time *yuh* throw lead on my range," Pat yelled at him with sudden vehemence. "Do *yuh* savvy, Kershaw? Get tough with my outfit, and I'll kill *yuh*!"

Jap shrank back as if expecting the threat to be carried out momentarily. A snaky gleam in his eye said that, if not altogether cowed by this rough handling, he would find it healthy in future to avoid this man's anger. Yet strong passions stirred in his dazed brain

even now. Putting on a sullen, hangdog look, he muttered something inaudibly.

Pat instantly bent over his prostrate form, with menacing look. "*What's that?*" he grated.

"Nothin'—I was talkin' to myself," Jap jerked out hastily, scared eyes fastened on Pat's boots as if anticipating further assault. A naked revelation of character—the clear measure of what Stevens could have expected had the tables been turned—his fear did not escape the latter's shrewd notice. Pat's lip curled.

"Okay, rat. Crawl back to your friends," he grunted. "It *might* pay to tell 'em I'm not interested in red herrings—either on my Spring Creek range, or here in town . . . I'm damn sure it'll pay *you* to remember it!"

With contemptuous scorn, he turned his back on the prone man and walked off. It was a full minute before he could be sure a vengeful slug would not come whistling after. But evidently he had accurately judged his man. Like one who has learned his lesson, Jap picked himself up and slunk off toward the rear of the hotel, where he presently faded from sight.

Stepping into the Gold Eagle, Pat gradually got the better of his burning indignation and disgust. Falling into laconic conversation with an acquaintance, he soon found himself discussing the bank holdup. His friend chided him rallyingly on the escape of Keno and Shoshone Thompson. Pat took it all good-naturedly.

"Say, by the way. Brad Haley mentioned old Kin Martin getting a bang on the knob this morning," he observed. "I hope Martin's okay?"

"Don't know." The other's nonchalance betrayed his

lack of interest. "This is the first day in quite a spell that old Kin ain't been crawlin' the saloons—"

The casual remark gave Pat pause. "That's right," he agreed. "I haven't seen him around either. Maybe he's nursin' a sore head."

The talk turned to other things, but Stevens did not forget. Ten minutes later he turned out of the bar and started away, a speculative glint in his eye.

"Must be gettin' old, not to've thought of that before," he soliloquized, with faint scorn. "Martin's unvarnished story of that business this morning ought to be at least as worth hearin' as Brad Haley's."

Martin had been bunking lately with another old codger in a broken-down frame house near the outskirts of town. Pat bent his steps in that direction and was turning the corner of a barn not far from the place when he bumped into Sam Sloan, hurrying the other way.

It was so unexpected on both sides that they halted to stare tentatively at each other for a moment. Pat was the first to speak.

"Yuh thought of the same thing I did," he accused humorously. "And now I suppose you're full to the gills of Kin's sad story—"

"Not yet, I ain't," denied Sam, a look of uneasiness on his stubbly face. "But it ain't for lack of tryin'—"

Pat took this answer in with attentive care. "You mean yuh didn't find Martin home?" he demanded.

Sloan shook his head. "He ain't now—nor ain't been all afternoon. Avery says he started for the doctor's to git somethin' for his headache, an' didn't come back. I went there, an' come foggin' back here again, without

any better luck . . . Pat, old Kin ain't to be found nowheres!"

They exchanged sober glances, gauging the import of this.

"I'll bet a cookie his story of that jail-break didn't gibe with Haley's," burst out Sam explosively. "But—"

"But what, Sam?"

Sloan shook his head gloomily. "I hate t' think of the old man bein' put away," he muttered.

Pat nodded in comprehension. "We're up against a bunch who'll stop at nothing," he responded tersely. "Kin Martin's life wouldn't hold 'em back a second—"

"Nor ours neither, yuh mean!" Sam interjected gruffly.

At no particular loss for more than one avenue of inquiry to pursue, they chose to proceed slowly, discussing the matter over their supper at a back table in the local beanery.

"Wal, Haley *ought* t' be interested in Martin's suspicious disappearance." Sloan summed up their findings, finally. "If he ain't, Judge Blaine could easy be persuaded t' prod his bump of curiosity—"

"We'll try Brad first." Pat nodded, scraping his chair back. "No good reason why he shouldn't be concerned for the welfare of a local resident. We'll give him his chance to toe the line."

Hastily gulping down the last of his third cup of coffee, Sam rose to follow, wiping his lips on a somewhat ragged sleeve. They proceeded first to the jail, their feet crunching the gravel. In the office, as usual, a turned-down lantern burned dimly. But no one was here.

"Humph! Only one other place he c'd be," grunted Sam.

Making their way up-street in the direction of the Gold Eagle, they were yet some rods distant when a sudden racket of raised voices and clattering chairs emanating from the saloon apprised them that something unusual was afoot.

“If Haley ain’t on the ground, he oughta be—with a ruckus goin’ on,” the pudgy little man exclaimed, quickening his short-legged pace. “C’mon, Stevens! It’s gettin’ so’s I can’t bear t’ let anything happen in this town without hornin’ in on it. An’ this time it ain’t no different!”

13.

A COUPLE of miles out of Dutch Springs, Ezra caught up with Libby Haley. Smiling at him, the girl glanced with practiced eye at the led horse.

“Quarter Circle JA,” she read the brand, in faint surprise. “What does that mean, Ezra? As ranchers, you and Pat Stevens can hardly be reduced to renting livery stock!”

“No’m.” The big redhead was not over communicative. “We was in a hurry, is all.”

If she expected him to go on, she was doomed to disappointment. Libby said no more. But with her knowledge of the uses to which an extra horse was occasionally put, she maintained a careful watch as they rode on.

Nearing the hills, without comment Ezra swung out of the Tumbling K ranch trail to head toward the Spring Creek range. Seeing this, Libby hung back briefly. "Isn't that going rather out of our way?" she called.

"You kin go on," returned Ez gruffly. "I'll ketch up—"

It decided the girl. She turned to follow, spurring her pony forward, and thereafter clung closely to her companion. Her puzzlement was manifest when Ezra finally reached the place where Cap Downs waited and the puncher moved out to take the extra horse. She did not attempt to overhear the brief exchange between the two men, but sat looking after Downs with wrinkled forehead as he singlefooted away toward the Lazy Mare. Ez glanced at her shrewdly, and gave a chuckle.

"Thought I was joggin' over here t' gather up a corpse, didn't yuh?" he accused.

Libby's momentary diffidence was answer enough. "I didn't know what to expect, Ezra." But her next remark gave proof that she had been turning the matter over to some purpose. "Aren't we near the creek that was in dispute between Pat and—Mr. Kershaw?"

"Wal, now, there wa'n't no dispute," Ezra evaded dryly.

But Libby would not let it rest there. Her probing queries continued until she had drawn from him the full story of Cap Downs's morning adventure. As for who had done the shooting, Ez admitted that Jap Kershaw was involved, but that was as far as he would go.

"Jap?" the girl eyed him with slow gravity. "But, Ezra, Jap and Will are accused of engineering that jail

~~J. K. K.~~
delivery at almost exactly the same time this—this other affair must have taken place!"

"Yeah. That's right." Ez nodded woodenly. "Busy little fellers, ain't they?"

Whether or not she took this as a snub, the girl maintained a sober silence as they rode across the Spring Creek bottoms and entered Trap Canyon. Though she had not visited the Tumbling K since the Kershaws had taken over, she knew the place. Her glance ran ahead watchfully as she and Ezra approached. Having schooled her features with care, she revealed neither gratification nor any other feeling when they spied Will Kershaw watching alertly from a corral as they rode into the yard.

Gazing hard at the girl, Will tossed aside the riata with which he was about to snare a bronc and stepped out at the gate.

"Hello, Will," Libby greeted him in a clear, quiet voice.

Uncertainty of what to expect from this visit held the young fellow silent, nodding curtly.

"Will, I—this is a friendly call," Libby brought out, briefly flustered. "I beg you to believe me!"

Will's opaque glance slid to Ezra, known to him chiefly as Pat Stevens's crony. Under the circumstances, he might perhaps have been excused for doubting her.

"What's the rest of it?" he inquired strictly.

I thought you should know at once that you and your brother are believed to be responsible for Keno and Shoshone Thompson's escape from jail early this morning—"

Will's steady gaze hardened. "So yuh've heard something else bad about me! Ain't wastin' no time in

bringin' it straight to my door, are yuh?" he exclaimed defiantly.

Thus deliberately affronted, Libby lost some of her color, if not her courage. "Wouldn't you rather it had been me, than—someone ready to take action in the matter?" she countered steadily.

Scorn lent an edge to Will's husky retort. "Yuh wouldn't bother comin' here at all if yuh didn't believe it yoreself!" he accused flatly.

"Hold on now, Kershaw," Ezra inserted, with brusque severity. "She's been nice 'nough t' bring yuh a friendly warnin'. I dunno how much yuh expect in the way of a favor—"

"Yuh *do* believe it of me, don't yuh?" Will threw directly at Libby, shearing through all this talk with grim brevity.

"No, I don't!" Color stained Libby's cheeks, lending vehemence to her words. "I never dreamed of it for a second! You should know me better than that, Will!"

"Maybe I should." Manifestly he wanted to take her at face value; but his look was stubborn, experience and observation alike warning him that by all the rules of logic this girl must be and remain his sworn foe.

"Mebby it'd help," Ezra told him, with disgusted emphasis, "t' mention that she's got a good solid reason fer knowin' better!"

It arrested Kershaw, who darted a keen look from one to the other of them. "Wouldn't be tryin' to cover for her, would yuh?" he demanded thinly.

"Why, we c'd ask Cap Downs if he thought the lead whistlin' past his head this mornin' was only an alibi," Ezra snapped scathingly.

Will accepted that without batting an eye. His glance persisted in returning to Libby, tinged with suspicion.

"Why are you so quick about fetchin' this warning, then?" he rasped, harsh with suppressed feeling. "There must be some reason—"

Richer blood dyed Libby's throat and spread to her forehead. "Do you find that so hard to guess—?" she began.

He jerked a dogged denial. "Naw, it's too easy, if anythin'." Bitterness crept into the brutal words. "It's never been over my head, ma'am, that you're so damned busy about the sheriff's business—likely because your pa ain't!"

A blow could scarcely have made the girl shrink with greater pain. "You can't mean that," she murmured.

"I can mean it, and more!" flashed Will passionately. "The real reason you're bringin' this story to me, is because your father himself was mixed up in that jail-break—and you know it!"

Ezra tensed at the flagrant insult. Even Will caught himself, suddenly aware that he had gone too far. But Libby only stared at him with strangely dulled eyes, her silent wilting seeming an eloquent confession.

"Dammit, Kershaw! Watch out what you're sayin'," Ezra exclaimed angrily.

Will scarcely heard him, his gaze fastened on the girl's suffering face. Too late, the young fellow appeared aghast at his own temerity.

"Well, hold on. Maybe I'm wrong at that," he got out hurriedly. "Reckon I didn't intend to stick no knife into yuh, Libby—"

The girl half-turned away, her face curiously lifeless.

"It's—all right," she whispered. "Perhaps I made a mistake in coming here, after all."

Will seemed to regain his resolution with a rush, his manner stiffening. "It's plain somebody made a serious mistake," he said stoutly. "I'm not so sure now it was you. But I aim to find out!"

"Wal, there's still this little matter on Stevens's Spring Creek range t' discuss, Kershaw!" Ezra said plainly. "I come here with that in mind—"

"Later, Ezra." Will brushed him aside impatiently, grabbing up his rope and looping a mettlesome steel-dust pony as if suddenly in a terrific hurry. "No time to spare yuh right now!"

Ez had his own reasons for letting him get away with this, watching with pretended severity as Will snatched a well worn saddle off the corral poles and swung it up on the horse. The young fellow moved with practiced speed, not even delaying as a gruff voice entered the talk.

"What's this about, now?"

It was Kyle Kershaw, scanning them all with sharp eyes, having appeared abruptly at the corner of the corral.

"Howdy, Kyle." Ezra was curt.

"Howdy yoreself. What is it yuh want to talk over with Will?"

"Wal—no matter. He ain't in the mood," returned Ez dryly. "But now you're here, Kershaw, mebby you'll do as well."

Waiting to hear no more, Will toed the stirrup and swung astride his mount. Curbing the frisky horse, he could not forego stealing a final glance at Libby's

averted face. He'd been pretty hard on her—not harder, perhaps, than the facts appeared to call for. And yet he could find it in his heart to experience a faint compunction for his brusqueness toward a girl against whom he could after all level no specific charge of injury to himself.

Still the results of this talk left him stern and fixed of purpose. Useless to explain to anyone, let alone to the disinterested daughter of a sheriff, how he felt about the sinister cloud gathering around his name! Kicking the bronc into swift motion, Will struck across the ranch yard toward the trail to town, paying no heed to the harsh call his father sent after him.

Following the winding course of the canyon downward, he did not check his pace. And once having won to the open range he increased it if anything. In his brain churned the ridiculous charge that he had assisted in a jail-break, spurring his smoldering anger to fresh outbursts.

That Jap might well have been guilty of such a move he only too well understood—except that, in this case, he happened to know better. It made no difference. Determination to see justice done and cram the false accusations down the throats of fools steeled his nerve.

"Let's see," Will soliloquized, striving for cool reflection. "Not much use expectin' common sense out of Sheriff Haley about this. There was an old turnkey lookin' after Keno and Shoshone, though. Kin Martin . . . Maybe I can look him up for a starter."

Unaware that Pat and Sam Sloan were to follow on a similar quest later in the day, Will turned toward Martin's home on reaching Dutch Springs and presently banged on the door. After a measurable wait, Eph

Avery creaked out, squinting against the bright light.

"Howdy, Avery. Sorry to bother yuh. Where's Martin?"

"Ain't here," growled Eph, with the dyspeptic crabbedness of the aged, having taken his time in looking Will over.

"Too bad." Will was good-natured about it. "Where is he?"

"Ain't here, I said, boy! Can't yuh hear me?" complained Eph cantankerously. Not recognizing Will, he evinced no slightest intention to accommodate him.

"Where would yuh say I might find—"

"Oh hell." Abruptly Avery turned his bowed back and slammed the door smartly.

Not particularly ruffled by this treatment, which he believed deliberate, Will was left gazing at the outside panels for a moment, frowning thoughtfully.

"No help to be had from these town cranks, that's plain," he mused darkly. "So what's next?"

Brows drawn together in concentration, he laboriously canvassed what he knew of Kin Martin. It was little enough. But he did recall that more than once he had observed Martin hobnobbing, after the manner of the downtrodden and lightly regarded, with old Lyte Kramer, another of his kind.

The fact that Kramer was at least nominally employed by Dude Buell at once presented a problem. Will had little use for Buell under any circumstances. But finally he shrugged.

"Dude can't do more than throw me out," he thought to himself bleakly. "I'll have a word with old Lyte if I can find him."

Approaching Buell's real-estate office circumspectly,

Will looked the ground over. He saw nothing of the grizzled handyman anywhere about. Risking a bold look in through the front windows, where Dude and a frock-coated assistant worked conscientiously at respectability, he had no better luck. A glance up and down the street revealed no sign of Kramer.

Disheartened, Will was about to give up when a sudden thought struck him. "Why, say! Kramer's probably out at Buell's ranch," he muttered. "It's worth a try. At least I can get at him there without interference—"

He lost no time in reaching his horse and turning away from the environs of the little cow town. By no means forgetful of Libby's warning, he had been expecting discovery at any moment and heaved a sigh of relief on getting away again without molestation.

Buell's Bar Bell ranch lay several miles from town, not far from the Hopewell Junction road. Riding out there, Will could not help wondering what he would find. He might after all be wasting his time on such an errand.

"Must be turnin' yellow," he muttered in self-disgust. "I sure welcomed the chance to pull away from town—when all the while it's Kin Martin I'm lookin' for!"

But he experienced a shock of surprise, on rounding the Bar Bell ranch house, to observe Martin and old Kramer perched together on the corral bars at the rear of the place. The two old rawhides saw him as quickly. Neither made a move, watching his approach with compressed lips and wrinkled, impassive faces.

"What're yuh after here, Kershaw?" Lyte greeted him gruffly, without any attempt at friendliness.

Hauling in a few feet away, Will jabbed a thumb at Kin Martin. "I'm wantin' a five minutes' talk with him, Kramer. Hope yuh don't mind?"

"I don't," retorted Lyte, with senile pertness. "How 'bout askin' if he does?" he cackled.

Martin stared at Will with obdurate indifference. "Got nothin' to say to yuh," he grumbled, in a tone meant to be final.

"Let me speak," Will urged reasonably. "You've got nothing to lose, Martin—and it may do someone some genuine good . . . My brother and I stand accused of roddin' that jail-break," he hurried on, before the other could interrupt. "You must know somethin' about it! At least enough to clear us?" His eye rested on the soiled bandage encircling old Kin's head under the battered hat.

Martin hesitated, finally shaking a denial. "Don't know a thing, Kershaw!" he said.

"But, hang it, that don't make sense." Will was earnest. "At least you must know it *couldn't've* been us—"

"Don't know anything o' the kind!" Kin snapped acrimoniously. "An' not knowin', can't say it, o' course!"

"But you told Brad Haley your story?" Will insisted. "Surely he must know as much as you do by now—"

"That's strictly between him an' I, ain't it?" demanded Kin tartly.

"If there's any doubt about it, I'm perfectly capable of draggin' yuh back there," the young fellow retorted sharply, angered by this reasonless opposition.

"No, yuh don't!" Both the old men were spitefully determined on this point. "Ain't a mite o' use o' that," Martin concluded with utmost firmness.

Will privately professed himself at some loss as to how to proceed. Surely this old codger held the key to what he had to know. "Then Haley knows where yuh are now?" he queried.

"Sure, he does—" Too late Kin saw his mistake, and would have drawn back.

Will pounced on the unguarded admission, nodding coolly. "I'll just check on that with the sheriff himself," he said thinly. "If there's any reason to believe that Dude Buell—or anyone else—sent you out here away from folks for his own purposes, that'll be gone into, too!"

Kin and old Lyte both vociferously scoffed at this. But their bluster rang false. Sure he had hit on something, if only he could be sure what; knowing he would get no further here now, Will turned his pony reluctantly away. He jogged out of the yard, ignoring the shrill objurgations hurled after him by those old scarecrows perched on the corral, perfectly aware now that no reasonable choice lay open to him. He must return to town, and do what he had to do there, if he meant to run this string out to its conclusion.

Dusk lay over the gray range when he reached Dutch Springs once more. It would help a little. But he must brave this town openly if he wanted to accomplish his purpose.

After racking his bronc before the Gold Eagle he strode inside, hat brim lowered against the curious glances. Brad Haley, he saw at once, was seated at a poker tble in the rear of the place, one of a casual circle.

"Brad." Boldly Will leaned against the bar a dozen feet from the table, his manner deliberately easy. His

glance did not waver, pinning the other as Haley looked up. His words were pitched low, compelling. "Step over here. I want a talk with you!"

14.

SHERIFF HALEY examined Will briefly with disfavor, and turned back to his game. He said nothing. A hand was being played out, and in the unbroken silence Brad gave all his attention to the softly rustling pasteboards.

Will ran a nervously hostile glance round the table. It was no surprise to see Dude Buell here, part-time gambler that he was. At another time, Will might have found the presence of Art Bickle worthy of note, at the same table with Buell, Henshew the hotelman, and Cash Cohannon, who ran a recently opened grocery. As a bank employee Bickle was considered properly impervious to the appeal of loose cash. Perhaps the casual inclusion of the lawman, politically strong in Powder County at last reports, made everything above board. But the cashier had grown reckless of late; even Will had heard that at poker he was a notorious plunger, undaunted by losses.

Will grew tense and impatient as the final cards fell, and check and bet ran the circle. It struck him as irrational that poker should be the major concern, at such a time, of a man of the law.

"Haley," he called out roughly. "What I've got for yuh won't wait!"

The headlong importunity of this challenge apparently failed to touch Haley or, for the moment, any of the others here.

"Three aces showin'," droned the sheriff, glancing hawklike around the board, absorbed in his own concerns.

"Got yuh, Brad! Four treys," exclaimed Bickle tightly, flipping his hole card. Triumphant and flushed, he extended a tentative, talon-like hand over the pot. Obviously, from the scarcity of coins before him, he badly needed it to bolster his stake.

Haley stayed him with a gesture of his dead cigar. "Easy, Art." His tone was lazily good-humored. "I got a cute trick in the hole myself." In the bated silence he turned up his fourth ace with bland nonchalance. "Sorry, old boy. It's the run of the cards—"

"Haley, I won't waste time with you!" said Will, with deadly intent.

Brad paused, his brown face gone set and impenetrable. He turned heavily in his seat, his flat voice harsh and grating.

"Get out, Kershaw," he rumbled, in ponderous disposal. "Don't bother me!"

The eyes of these listening men lit with faintly derisive amusement. Inwardly seething, by no means defeated, Will grimly delayed till the lawman hoisted his hefty bulk partially out of his chair to rake in the pot. Then, with a quick firm step, and a determined side-wise sweep of his boot, the young fellow kicked Haley's seat out from under him.

The chair's bouncing clatter was drowned in the

solid, wall-shaking thud as Haley lost balance and fell heavily to the floor. Brad rolled over with a roar, rearing his head up like a turtle, his eyes suddenly terrible.

Will grimly closed in on him, determined to pin this man's undivided attention regardless of means. Left to his own devices, he might have effected his purpose after a fashion. But Cohannon and Al Henshew sprang up to grasp his arms, coming in fast from behind. If it was their purpose to crush him down, they had their hands full. Struggling and grunting, Will staggered this way and that, endeavoring to fling them off.

Haley came up from the floor in a rush before he could win free. The lawman's thick knee smashed into Will's stomach. As he doubled over, Brad's sausagelike fingers gripped him by the scruff of the neck. With a ruthless jerk he swung Will around to face the door.

"Outside with the fool!" he puffed.

Nothing loath, Haley's helpers promptly rushed Will blindly forward, head down, with accelerating speed. Short of the door frame, they released him with a final thrust, one of them thoughtfully extending a tripping boot at the last instant. Thrust off-balance to begin with, utterly unable to halt his momentum, Will jarringly struck the boards on the edge of the low porch and catapulted heavily into the street to lie spread-eagled in the dust.

In his angry prowling, not long after his meeting with Pat Stevens, Jap arrived at the spot while Will still lay, choked and groggy, where he had been flung. Jap hauled his brother up with a snarl, shaking him roughly back to his senses. His burning eye swung toward the doorway of the saloon.

"Toss yuh out of there, did they?" he rasped angrily.

Will nodded mutely, still only partially in command of his wits. "I was tryin' to face Haley—" he began, thickly. "They ganged up on me!"

Jap caught fiercely at that name. "So it's Haley's work, eh?" He seemed virtually to spit fire and brimstone, giving Will a hearty shove toward the door. "Okay, git back in there pronto! We'll see whether he'll throw the two of us out!"

Unwillingly, the younger man stared at the Gold Eagle. Not averse to the bold course which Jap proposed, he was summoning his courage. He took a slow step, arms stiff at his sides. Again Jap jabbed him.

"Get goin'!"

Will's self-command was returning fast now. He paused for one comprehensive backward glance, carrying its own sharp admonition. "Whatever happens, you better stick!" issued from his barely parted lips. Stepping up with cold resolution then, he strode into the bar with Jap close at his shoulder.

Seated once more in his chair, in the act of dealing a hand, Brad Haley gave the advancing pair one swift look of shrewd appraisal and froze.

"Dammit all, Kershaw!" He directed his cold anger at Will. "Come back for more, have yuh?"

"Slack off, Haley!" Jap ordered brusquely, stepping to the fore. "Yuh ain't dealin' with no kid now."

Brad measured him inscrutably, his look forbidding. "In any hurry t' talk yore way into a cell, Jap? Because yuh ain't got far to go," was his thin-lipped thrust. "You don't seem to know yore own luck—"

Jap favored him with a basilisk grimace. barren of humor. "That's a good subject!" he taunted. "From all

the talk, we both should've been jugged before this . . . Wouldn't have no good reason for holdin' off, would yuh, Sheriff?" There was the thin prick of a rapier in this off-hand query.

Brad exploded cholerically, taut in his seat, both his hands braced. "Blast yore rotten gall!" he roared. "That's the thanks I get for showin' a little toleration—!"

"Oh. That yore name for throwin' Will out of the place?" jibed Jap with acid innocence. "I thought yuh just didn't aim t' listen to him. Maybe," he drawled, a sudden sharp jump in his voice, "you'll listen to me!"

Haley sprang up, waving a burly fist. "Don't try yore bulldozin' on me," he fired out in leaden warning. "I ain't disposed t' stand for any horseplay, Kershaw! Pull yore freight while yuh can still make it—and if I was you, I'd be thinkin' of greener pastures! Yuh stand charged now with enough serious offenses to—"

The words died away in a heavy quiet, which gave place as abruptly to the measured thump of boots. All eyes swung that way as a lanky figure emerged without haste from the shadowy rear of the place.

Kyle Kershaw halted in plain view of all, his ponderous glance dwelling on Brad Haley's purple countenance.

"I've heard this kind o' talk too long," the rancher said grimly, his regard never faltering. "Name the charges against my sons, Haley, an' they'll answer 'em!"

Brad glowered his hatred. "What guarantee is there o' that?" he spat out.

"They'll answer," Kyle reiterated. "Because I'll undertake t' see that they do!"

Haley's sneer was ugly. "No deal, Kershaw. The pack of yuh are no damned good! You've spelled nothin' but trouble on this range from the beginnin'. Lord knows how many robberies yuh know more about than the law allows. Between yuh, you brought Turk Marble to Powder Valley. And yuh sprung his boys!" The lawman's gravelly voice rose. "It sums up to an aggravated nuisance, carryin' a stiff sentence for yuh all—"

Kyle started forward impetuously, his arm upraised. "More of yore damned vague talk!" he bawled furiously. "Get down t' cases, yuh half-baked badge-toter! I won't stand for this dodgin' an' name-callin'!"

Haley gave him a brisk backward shove, just as Jap and Will started purposefully forward. On the instant, the cardplayers rose hastily from their chairs, and a rumbling babel of voices broke out.

This was the moment chosen by Pat and Sam Sloan to step hurriedly into the Gold Eagle. Seeing at a glance how tense the situation was, they pushed forward. Pat thrust Jap aside as the latter leveled a haymaker at Sheriff Haley, and Sam prudently stepped in front of the truculent brothers, vouchsafing Jap a scowling reprimand.

"What's the difficulty here?" Pat asked curtly.

Haley glared around at him with arrested ire. "I've concluded t' take these blackleg Kershaws in custody, Stevens," he growled. "That's if yuh figure it's any of yore mix!"

Pat regarded him contemptuously. "I see. Got in your hair at last, have they?" His drawling tone all but made Brad jump. "So now they've practically crawled into your lap, you'll hustle them off to the calaboose!"

. . . Fine work, Haley, I must say," he observed scathingly. "I can't seem to figure what this place expects of a law enforcement officer—"

Pat paused to take in the poker group, his alert mind ticking off these faces. Dude Buell did not startle him greatly, nor did Cohannon; but when he noted Henshew, and Art Bickle as well, an alarm rang faintly in his brain. Its only manifestation was the increased severity with which he returned to Brad.

"Poker is a swell way of attractin' flies—or talkin' a good arrest," he said flatly. "I'll just remind yuh that Jap here, is the man you accepted my deputy's badge for *not* arrestin'. Still at liberty, it seems, after bargain' in here and practically slappin' your face!"

"Dang it, Stevens. I'll do plenty if yuh'll get out o' the way!" Haley blustered.

"Fine!" Pat's ready concurrence mocked him. "Maybe you'll do something definite about these robberies, when yuh get that far along. I seem to see some of the—victims waitin'." His glance flicked Henshew, and lingered on Dude Buell.

"What *can* I do?" Brad asked desperately. "Make a suggestion! Marble got away. And his men were sprung—"

Stevens shrugged. "You *can't* do much, can you?" he retorted with stinging calm. "Apparently it's beyond your powers even to fork a bronc and make the gesture of chousin' around a bit, on the hunt!"

Haley's flush was one of chagrined vexation. "You did no better!" he cried, striving to make vehemence serve as substitute for point in his bitter talk.

"Nonsense! *I* nabbed the hombres you and your

friends allowed to escape. I also talked the deal over with Turk Marble, Haley—and a damned fishy one it is, if *he's* any judge . . . I think Marble's burned up about you, too," he added artlessly. "Couldn't figure out exactly why—"

"Burned up, is he?" Brad bristled, snorting so violently that it seemed a cover for awakening alarm. "I'll burn him, if I ever catch him over my sights!"

"When could that be? I don't see any of these upstandin' citizens urgin' you to brisker action." Pat glanced over the Sheriff's cronies with excoriating amusement. "I can only conclude they're satisfied as things stand."

He was really laying it on the line now. But Dude Buell and Henshew, at least, did not intend to allow the indictment without a vigorous protest.

"Where do yuh get that stuff, Stevens?" Buell exclaimed. "Haley's done what a man can!"

"Ah." Pat was on him quickly. "Then he's luckier than me. Brad didn't look at it the same way, in my case."

"Maybe it's yore mouth he don't like," Buell hurled back. "Yuh struck even me as a suspiciously interested hombre, Stevens! Keep it up, an' we'll be forced to look into yore status a mite closer!"

Kyle Kershaw put in a gruff dissent, others had their say, and for a moment no one could be clearly heard. But men had been drifting into the Gold Eagle since the altercation began, to listen with attention; and at this point Jeb Winters thrust into the talk.

"Stevens is right," the merchant ruled, conscious of his undoubted weight in the community. "He's done

far more'n you, Buell, in tryin' to iron this mess out. As a posseman who couldn't hang onto a bound prisoner, I wouldn't talk . . . It may interest yuh all," he continued, "to hear that I've talked things over with Judge Blaine. Now, Judge Jeff's a patient man. But even he agrees that mighty little's been done—an' that a heap more could be. It's up t' you, Haley, to produce some mighty prompt results, if yuh don't aim to have all this remembered next election!"

It was the most sobering blast yet leveled at Brad. Coming from Winters, it carried an impact certain to be felt in Dutch Springs. But even that fact apparently failed to impress Dude Buell. Money had always been his criterion of power, and he had amassed considerable during his brief period in the valley.

"Pull yore horns in, blowhard!" he tossed at Jeb with scant respect. "If he's his own man, Brad Haley can still tell you an' the commissioners to go jump down the arroyo!"

It was a little strong, even for Haley, who made a halfhearted attempt to shush the speaker. But the question at issue was a sore point with all men. Argument broke out, in which vociferous voices contended for attention without signal success. Badgered and harassed, the sheriff revealed a rapidly increasing shortness of temper.

"Blame it all, now, be quiet!" he roared, glaring about. "I'll undertake t' assume charge here, an' somebody'll sweat. There's still the ordinance against disturbance of the peace on the books, and by Godfrey, I'll stretch it aplenty in a pinch!"

Jap chose this unfortunate juncture to display his in-

veterate independence. "Dry up, Haley," he said. "Yuh couldn't enforce a weather bulletin readin' hot an' dry for August—"

Brad's eyes flamed. "That does it! By grab," he belled in a fury, "you're goin' with me! An' to teach you scum a lesson, I'll make it unanimous for the three of yuh!"

He lunged toward Jap, yanking out a clinking set of manacles, only to bump into Pat Stevens who, unintentionally or otherwise, happened to be standing squarely in his path.

"One side, Stevens—"

Pat failed to comply. Sam trod on the instep of Dude Buell, hastily crowding his way forward as if anxious to get into the act. Cursing, Dude backed up.

"Just a reminder." Pat coolly grinned in the face of this crackling tension. "What *is* the specific charge against Kershaw again, Haley?"

Brad choked. "The same as I'll be levellin' against you, Stevens, the minute I get done with him!"

"Unfortunately, that don't give me much to go on. Let's maul this around, now."

Nerves were rasped raw, and tempers frayed. Pat's only object was to break up the affair without the outbreak of useless violence. The edge left his voice, and he strove smoothly to bring these angry men back to their senses. Sam selected this moment to step close to old Kyle for a muttered word.

"Stir yore stumps, Kershaw," he got out rapidly, under his breath. "Haul that ornery hothead o' yores outa here if yuh have t' rope him—an' take Will with yuh! Don't yuh understand? It ain't healthy for yuh here

right now. Stevens'll give yuh time to scramble clear, but I can't promise no more!"

Moments before, the rancher's graying countenance had shown his awareness of the gravity of the situation. Muttering, he started to shoulder Jap in the direction of the door, gesturing at the same time to Will.

Al Henshew read their intention. "Stop 'em, Brad!" he whipped out with venomous insistence. "They're makin' a joke of yore authority!"

It afforded the opening for which Pat had been playing. He fronted up to the hotelman bluntly.

"That's mighty hard talk, Al," he droned. "Maybe as a public-spirited citizen with a bone to pick, you'd admire to try it!"

Stolidly arguing, Henshew inadvertently covered the moment or two it took the Kershaws to move to the door and disappear from view. Pat was content to let the argument run on for a few minutes, fending off the noisy threats of the sheriff, before he pulled away. At length he and Sloan bluffed their way out of the place, safe for the present. But neither was under any illusions concerning the explosive air of danger and devious treachery hovering over this normally somnolent little cow town.

15.

“YUH STAYIN’ in town?” inquired Sam as they moved up street from the Gold Eagle.

“No—” Pat thought it prudent to absent himself for this night. “You might as well ride out to the Lazy Mare with me, till Ez shows up.”

It was all right with Sloan. They were stepping into the public corral for their broncs when a guarded call reached their ears. Pat paused and turned, watching a shadowy form slowly approach.

“That you—ain’t it, Stevens?”

“Holy smoke.” Pat looked at the other hard. “Yuh mean to say you’re still in town, Kershaw?” His tone conveyed a measure of censure.

“Never mind.” Kyle brushed his concern aside. “I shoved Will an’ Jap on ahead, an’ waited—figurin’ I might run onto you.” His pause carried its own portent. “Where do yuh reckon this business is goin’ to end, Stevens?”

“What business? If you mean this charge of jail-breaking against your sons—”

“Wal—that, among other things.”

“Nothin’ to it,” Pat returned promptly. “It’s purely a blind everybody appears to understand well enough, except maybe you. Unfortunately that’s not the worst mark against Jap—”

"I was comin' to that." Kyle seemed uneasy, but he thrust on doggedly. "It's plumb unlucky for everybody—but the fact is, Turk Marble's been hangin' around again. Jap brought him right to the ranch. I want yuh t' know, Stevens, because yuh might suggest somethin' I can do about it."

"Thanks, Kyle." Pat's manner was markedly warmer. "I appreciate the thought. Just what *did* yuh do?"

"Wal, I give Jap unvarnished hell—an' ordered Marble off, in no uncertain terms," Kershaw told him grimly. "Reckon he knows what t' expect from me. But, Stevens, he's got some infernal drag with Jap I don't savvy."

He rubbed his hands together ponderingly. Pat had no difficulty in reading the masked anguish of a father. How could he tell Kyle that, in all probability, Jap was already lost and damned? Was the man somehow able to blind his better judgment to the bitter truth?

"I take it, Kershaw, that Will hasn't got himself mixed up in that tangle yet?" he evaded coolly.

"No, he hain't!" Kyle's look smoldered. "I'll break his neck the day he does. But—" He hesitated. "Strange as it sounds, he tries t' look after Jap instead, as if *he* was the oldest!"

Pat's nod was ready. "I've figured it out that's what he was up to, when Jap took it on himself to blaze away at my puncher." His tone was light. "Downs thought for a minute they were both tryin' to finish him—"

Kyle exhibited honest dismay. "I been rackin' my brains how t' explain that to yuh, Stevens," he began, in confusion.

"Don't break a leg over it." Pat grinned easily. "I'm satisfied that was done on another man's orders—in the

hope that it would backfire in your direction. It didn't work."

"Wal." Kyle didn't know what to say. "I'm obliged for that."

"Then you've paid in full," Pat assured him. "As for Marble, I wouldn't crowd that situation too hard. He may not bother yuh again, anyway. I'll straighten him out if I happen to run into him."

"Not much chance o' that, is there?" Kyle was gruff.

"Oh, I don't know." Pat was not saying more than he thought advisable. But knowledge that Turk Marble was once more practically in the valley stirred his pulse richly. He got the feeling that this snarled situation was not far from its climax, and that henceforth matters could only accelerate.

They talked a few minutes longer and Kyle departed, moving off into the shadows. Sam Sloan had taken it all in, and he waited for a matter of three minutes while Stevens stood deeply thoughtful, a hand on his saddle-horn.

"If Marble's still around, it won't take him long t' smoke that bank haul into the open," Sam could not resist speaking up at length. "His kind kin smell money a mile—"

"You're right, Sam. That's one way of sayin' it." Pat was sententious.

"Then yuh ain't leavin' t'night, after all," hazarded Sam suspiciously.

"No—but our stayin' has got to look natural. Let's see if there isn't a little game goin' in Winters's store."

As luck would have it, they found several acquaintances idling over the pasteboards in the rear of Jeb

Winters's general store. They sat in, and it was late before they rose once more—neither richer nor poorer by very much than when they started—but with the hands of the clock affording full and sufficient excuse for any man's remaining in town overnight without exciting comment. To seal it, they had a nightcap at the Gold Eagle, talking their game over. Pat was nothing if not bold, leading the way directly to the hotel. Henshew they found alone in the office, cogitating over a cold cigar.

"Maybe yuh don't want our business, Al, after our little run-in," Pat said to him pleasantly.

Henshew grunted. "Yore money's good, Stevens. I never carry my personal affairs over into business."

"That's sensible."

They took their old room again and slept undisturbed, as Pat had judged they would. Henshew would have his own reasons for not allowing anything further to happen in his house. Eating a leisurely breakfast in the dining-room the following morning, Sam abruptly dropped his fork in his haste to get out of his chair. Pat glanced around to see Libby Haley hurrying toward them.

"I heard by accident you were still in town," she told Pat, acknowledging the greetings of the pair. "May I sit down for a moment?"

They made her comfortable, ordering more coffee, and Libby waited only until they were alone once more.

"Pat, I've just learned something I fail altogether to understand," she began in a lowered voice. "Maybe you can help me make sense of it—"

"I'll try," he assented, and suddenly grinned. "By the way, yuh didn't have much luck keepin' young Kershaw away from town—you and Ezra—did yuh?"

Her expression grew faintly harassed, her look keen and searching. "Pat! I was afraid of just that! . . . You mean he did come here?"

Pat nodded. "And left again almost as fast, last night, with old Kyle at his heels." Chuckling, he gave her a glossed-over account of Will's adventure in Dutch Springs, without making it appear that the young fellow had run any great risk. "Now he's blown off steam, maybe he'll take it easier for a spell," he ended. "What was it yuh ran into, Libby?"

Reluctant to speak, she examined for an instant the marks she had pressed into the tablecloth. Then her grave eyes lifted.

"I knew Jap was in Dutch Springs last night," she said almost in a whisper. "Because he came to the house late to see Father."

The two men sat perfectly still, absorbing the unexpected shock of this. Sloan's ordinarily vacuous countenance went wooden. Pat permitted himself a mild lifting of startled eyebrows.

"That so?" He sounded casual. "They had quite a powwow, I expect—"

"I've no idea what it was about," the girl continued, color stealing into her face. "What could they have to talk over?"

Pat thought he knew the answer only too well. Here was the established link at last, direct from Turk Marble to Sheriff Haley. Given by witnesses not to be impeached, it damned Brad more conclusively than any

amount of indirect evidence could possibly do. But Pat was not prepared to allow any hint of his thoughts to reach the girl.

"Well, I don't know." Employing his full skill at circumlocution, he pretended a fine judicial suspension of judgment. "Jap put on an act in the Gold Eagle last night, Libby. He and your dad both lost their heads. Brad knew Jap and Will weren't actually mixed up in that jail delivery, because I gave him proof to the contrary." He regarded her engagingly. "It'd be natural for both of 'em to cool off afterwards. Yuh may have just overheard them makin' their peace."

The girl strove to accept this reading, without finding it easy. "I can't imagine any agreement Father would consent to reach with that man—"

"But consider Jap's position," Pat urged. "He's in a fine way to spend time in the cooler if he don't mend his fences in a hurry. Probably he was talkin' fast, and Brad was makin' it plenty hard goin' for him."

"I'm not quite sure it sounded that way . . ."

But Pat had succeeded in instilling uncertainty in her mind, and before he finished he won the girl back to a measure of serenity. Did she find it easy to doubt her father? Or the hardest task she had ever faced, yet inescapable? Pat thrust the thought away, but it was to end by giving him considerable food for thought.

Ezra put in an appearance as the three emerged to the street, and the Bar ES partners promptly fell into teeth-jarring altercation.

"Where in time yuh been hidin'?" Sam threw at the one-eyed giant, hoping to shut him up.

"Where *you* been, wart?" retorted Ezra fiercely.

"Whyn't yuh come home oncen in a while, an' yuh'd find out where I was—"

They ran on for some minutes, waxing warmer; the lanky redhead arguing for pressing chores at the Bar ES, while Sloan strove without success to stall him off. Sam gave over at length, with an expressive shrug.

"S'pose I'll have t' favor this overgrown lamebrain," he told Pat resignedly. "He's comin' down with an attack o' conscience, after not doin' a thing all summer. Reckon I'm the goat—"

Pat interposed in time to keep Ezra from attacking him bodily. "You two go ahead," he told them easily. "Nothin' doing in town at present, anyway. I'll likely be somewhere around when yuh come back."

They pulled out a few minutes later, and when they were gone it amused Pat to hold Libby in talk for a time. He had got a glimpse of Dude Buell, covertly watching the two of them from in front of his office. It suited Pat to let Buell wonder what they could be discussing at such length.

The girl went on her way and Pat delayed a moment, rolling a smoke. As he expected, Dude's interest abruptly languished. He disappeared into his office.

Pat dedicated the day to a casual study of the rhythm of this town. As the sunny hours passed he was never very far from the street. He noted the arrival and departure of every ranch rig; saw the punchers from up and down the valley ride in for the mail. A small handful of men he watched industriously, as regularly as they put in an appearance—the five members of the poker circle convened last night in the Gold Eagle.

It had not struck him then that there was anything

accidental about the particular composition of that group. With the exception of Cohannon, he had found one reason or another for suspecting every man jack of them, known and respected citizens as they were.

Cash Cohannon alone had thus far escaped his critical scrutiny; and it was solely on this account that Pat fell, early in the afternoon, to watching the grocer's store.

There seemed nothing unusual to be noted about the place, watch as he might; but it was no great length of time before Stevens observed with interest one peculiar circumstance. Sooner or later, at surprisingly brief intervals, he noted, one or another of the poker enthusiasts who had earned his special attention was apt to appear either at or near Cohannon's store. On one occasion, even Sheriff Haley stepped in to purchase a paper of tobacco from Cash and chatted on the store porch with the white-aproned proprietor for a good twenty minutes.

Seated on the stone horse-block at the corner of the hotel, fingering a cigaret, Pat asked himself whether he had discovered something of real significance.

"Looks almost as if those hombres were keepin' a watch on Cash's place," he mused. "That bein' the case, it can't hurt a bit for me to go on doin' the same—"

His hunch was sufficiently strong to find him still at his post when evening closed down on the quiet street. He did make one prudent move which was to pay off later. Quietly getting up his horse, soon after supper, he allowed himself to be seen jogging off in the direction of the Lazy Mare, with the notable lack of haste of the homeward bound. With thickening dusk he quickly circled back and, turning the pony into Kize Wagner's cor-

ral on the edge of town, returned to his watch of Cohannon's store from cover.

The evening was peaceful. At nine or thereabouts, he saw Cash ostentatiously turn out the lights and lock up. A few minutes later Cohannon stumped away in the direction of the Gold Eagle. It left Pat dangling. "Is that all for tonight?" he soliloquized blankly. Obviously it could profit him nothing to continue his surveillance of the locked store. He would have given much to walk casually into the saloon after Cohannon. But he had closed that door on himself by appearing to head for home.

Pat compromised by moving up to a post of observation overlooking the Gold Eagle. And it was well that his approach was quiet and unhurried. He was making for a side window, feeling his way through the dark, when he abruptly halted. It struck him that he had caught the shape of a shadowy head against the lighted window. Watching with care, he soon confirmed this rather startling discovery.

There was a watcher peeping into the Gold Eagle at some expense of dodging and craning; a man whom he made out to be no other than Jap Kershaw.

Jap presently ducked and ran to the front corner of the place, and Pat moved quietly to follow this. He was not much surprised to see Dude Buell and Cohannon step out of the saloon. They moved off up the street, Jap carefully stalking them a few rods to the rear.

"This is good." Pat grinned to himself. "Two crooks watched by a crook—and all of 'em performin' for me. This ought to get better as it goes along."

His levity dropped from him as he observed that

Buell and Cash Cohannon were heading directly for the latter's store. Cash used his key, and the two men stepped inside. After a moment a dim light showed.

They were inside for some time, evidently holding a conference. Pat could not be sure of their actions, for the dark outline of Jap's head, cautiously raised above the front windows, kept him from working too close.

After some twenty minutes Jap suddenly scuttled for the deep shadows, gone with barely a rustle. Dude and Cohannon emerged, murmuring quietly. After talking briefly, they parted at the bottom of the outside steps, Cash tossing back a gruff goodnight and clumping on up toward his living quarters over the store.

Buell moved off up-street, dogged at a safe distance by his shadow. Pat would have given something to know what was in Jap's mind, although he already had more than a vague idea.

He hung back after Dude and his trailer passed from view. Wrapped in a brown study as he conned events, he almost missed the faint creak of Cohannon's stairs. A moment later it was softly repeated. With bated breath, not daring to move, so close had he stolen, Pat watched Cohannon's ghostly form reappear and glide to the doorway of the store.

"Oh-oh. Monkey business," reflected Pat.

Cash let himself in with no more noise than a mouse; and this time it was Pat whose watchful eyes were glued to the window outside.

Cohannon was a long time in darkness, whatever he was about. At long last a faint gleam flickered, and Pat got a glimpse of the guarded candle. Cash was on the floor now—he was hunkered down before his safe, em-

bedded in the rear wall, and he needed this faint illumination to read the numbers.

That he meant to abstract something in secrecy there could be no doubt. At the moment that the safe door swung open like a black maw, the candle went out—snuffed the instant its usefulness had ended. Biting his lips with vexation, Pat could only plaster an ear against the glass. He heard soft, muffled thumps, and after some moments a dull, wooden clunking sound, much like that of the cover being replaced on a sugar barrel.

Moving away a second later in cautious haste, he was nodding to himself with something like satisfaction.

“Maybe I’m crazy,” he thought. “I *may* not know the hidin’ place for that bank loot, even now—but I’ll bet a plugged dollar I could almost spit on it from here!”

16.

A BLUEBOTTLE FLY buzzed pestiferously round the end of Sam Sloan’s beaked nose, disrupting the solemn morning quiet. A shake of the head dislodged it, but it came back. Slapping himself smartly in disgust, Sam straightened up, altering the position of his pudgy back against the warped boards on the shady side of the public corral in Dutch Springs.

“Dang that Stevens character, anyhow,” he grumbled in a bored voice. “Is he goin’ t’ meet us here like he said, or ain’t he?”

"Oh, shut up," retorted Ezra wearily. "Pat didn't set no time, an' yuh know it."

Sam snorted. "Why should he set one? Hours don't mean nothin' t' that boy, nor days neither. Time—huh!" Having delivered himself thus with satirical force, he settled once more for a longer wait. But it was plain that impatience wore on his nerves.

"Take it easy, like I'm doin'," Ez advised in a superior tone. "Keep up that dang fidgetin' an' yuh'll be all wore out—"

For a man so indolent and lethargic of appearance, Ezra's own action at that moment was a revelation. Even as his roving eye strayed in Sam's direction, he rolled one bony hip slightly, and on the instant his worn and shiny single-action .45 materialized in his big hand, a knotted thumb all but hiding the cocked hammer.

"Hold still, Sam," he whispered hoarsely. "There's that fly ag'in. Wait'll he lights, an' I'll git 'im!"

"Yuh will—like hell!" Sam yelped, flopping over sidewise in haste and rolling against the legs of his tethered horse. Ducking away quickly from those restless hoofs, he rose unsteadily to his knees. Rage glinted in his beady black eyes. "Yuh dotty old fool! Git a fly, an' knock over my cayuse too—not t' mention skinnin' my nose, like as not, with yore dang foolishness!" he barked furiously. "Ain't yuh got no brains atall?"

Ezra re-sheathed his gun in injured disgruntlement. "Ain't no doin' some folks a favor," he growled.

"No," drawled Sam with broadening sarcasm, sitting down again. "If it's all the same, we'll jest let it go. Thanks a lot!"

Ezra's one bleak eye took on a far-away look. He fell to whistling softly.

The truth was, these two were hard put to it to kill time whenever circumstance found them without matters of any particular moment on their hands. On riding into town they had been met by Kize Wagner, a bewhiskered and rheumatic friend of Stevens' whom they could trust. Pat had left word that, forced to return to the Lazy Mare the evening before, he would meet them this morning, probably at the corral; and his failure to put in an appearance after a long hour's wait contributed not a little to their present grumpiness.

A lone horseman plodded past outside the open gate, slow in the heavy heat, and Sam leaned forward to gaze that way in momentary interest. It wasn't Stevens. Sighing, Sam was settling his thickset shoulders once more, with a resigned air, when a sudden clangorous uproar of brazen sound tore the silence to shreds. *Clang—clang—clang!* Reverberating, metallic, and hollow, it seemed deafening in this almost primordial quiet.

Sam bounced to his feet in a flash, and Ezra unkinked his sinuous length with equal alacrity. They stared about, and at each other, with dropped jaws.

"It's them wagon-tire fire alarms they set up down by the bank," Sam whipped out. "Somebody's sluggin' 'em with a sledge! There's a fire, Ez!"

They burst out of the gate to stare down the street. Dutch Springs's straggling double row of sun-bleached frame business buildings more or less blocked the view; but at the other end of town a black, billowing coil of smoke rolled above the roofs, staining the turquoise sky.

"It's down past Jeb Winters's store—a Mexican shack mebby, in one o' them lanes," exclaimed Ezra gruffly. "Come on, Sam!"

He began to hurry forward, the shorter man at his

heels. They saw other men running from every direction, yelling at one another, and they increased their pace. Soon Ezra was going at a gangling lope. Sam's weight, and the shortness of his legs, soon had him puffing, scarlet of cheeks under the thick stubble. The wobbling high heels of his riding boots didn't help any, either.

"Can't yuh wait for a feller?" he flung out, in exasperation. But either Ezra chose to ignore him, or he didn't hear, for he went sailing on with giant strides.

Next moment, Sam's ankle turned over with agonizing sharpness on a stone unseen in the street's thick dust, and he sank down abruptly with a jolting groan. "Ez! Wait!" he wailed, in frustrated disgust. But Ezra was already beyond earshot, all his faculties bent on the dull crackling roar of flames which could be heard now above the cries of hastening men. A minute more and he was gone from sight.

Sitting there in the street, Sam straightened his leg out. An experimental waggle of his foot made him wince sharply. "Damn the fire!" he exclaimed, giving over all thought of going on.

Straightening up on his good leg, he hobbled painfully over to sink on the steps of Cohannon's Grocery. Sitting there alone, nursing his ankle with both hands and getting his breath back, he looked about him. Dutch Springs's scanty population, down to the old gaffers and the one or two kids, had lost little time in getting to the scene of the conflagration. There was scarcely a soul left in sight.

"Reckon I'm the only person left in this end o' town," Sam growled to himself sourly.

With that thought in his mind, the sudden scrape of

footsteps on the store porch directly behind him was decidedly startling. Wrenching his stocky bulk around, Sam saw Cohannon's freckled and lank-haired young clerk standing just outside the door, his staring eyes bugged out with excitement.

"Where's the fire at?" he demanded, glancing at Sam without actually seeing him.

Sam told him. Adding a few terse remarks about his desertion by Ezra, he struggled up and made his way into the store, where it seemed slightly cooler. The clerk followed. Leaning against the cracker barrel, Sam mopped his brow. He was sweating profusely.

"Phew! It's sure hot," he declared, energetically. "Go git me a drink, Eph."

Complying jerkily, the freckled young clerk appeared only half-attentive to Sam's further observations. Restless and ill at ease, there was something on his mind.

"You gonna be here a while?" he asked abruptly.

Sam understood. Seldom indeed did the heady excitement of a fire break the humdrum somnolence of the little cow town. Conscientious as he strove to be about his job, the clerk could hardly bear the thought of missing one altogether.

"Sure, Eph." Sam nodded, pursing his thick lips at a twinge from his twisted leg. Fat chance of his getting anywheres in a hurry!

"Good. With you here t' keep an eye on things," Eph said in a twinkling, whipping his dirty apron off, "mebby I can git away for a few minutes—"

"Ain't nobody goin' nowheres," spoke up a cold, level voice from the door. "An' now we're all agreed, let's git right down to business!"

Sam and Eph whirled. A kerchief-masked figure in

old clothes, with cold unwavering eyes, confronted them, a menacing gun in his fist. The clerk gaped at him stupidly.

"Wh-where'd you come from?" he blurted.

The pitiless black eyes slitted thinly. "Skip it," was the rasping response. "You—" the waggling gun-barrel indicated Sam with debonair insolence—"anchor yore hands high. . . . Now, Buster." The newcomer stared hard at Eph. "Jest step back an' open up that safe. Quick!" The order crackled.

"Don't know how, mister. I'm only the hired help—"

It could have been true, Cohannon being notoriously careful of his money. Or the safe dial might simply be turned on day lock, for convenience in making change. The bandit appeared to sense that this was the case.

"Don't know the combination, huh? Yuh better learn fast, boy—or say yore prayers!"

Eyes scared and faltering, freckled Eph hesitated. Young, untried by the hottest fires—scarcely a year past the cockleburried pants legs of careless youth, in fact—he was no craven at heart. Far from it. Sam read the direction of Eph's dangerous thought, and his cynical eyes turned warm.

"Do as he says, Eph," he murmured softly, before it was too late and the boy's brash courage flamed into useless and fatal bravery.

The robber's laugh was harsh. "That's right. 'Do as the man says, Eph!'" he mocked. "—Or I'll cut yore backbone loose from yore guts." The slashing, sudden words hardened to ringing steel.

Swallowing his indignation, Eph grudgingly moved toward the wall safe, still in no marked hurry.

"Yuh know," the masked man observed reflectively,

"with ever'body gone to that fire, I don't really *have* t' worry about the noise of a stray shot or two 'way up here. So if you'd rather not bother—" He broke off significantly.

Eph's movements perceptibly quickened at the chilling suggestion here. He twirled the dial, and the massive steel door swung open to the turning handle.

"Well, well! You *are* accommodatin'," exclaimed the robber admiringly. "Mebby now yuh know where t' lay hands on a gunnysack, eh? . . . Fine. Better an' better," the soft voice purred on. The slitted eyes raked Sam briefly and watchfully. "Jest stuff that sack for me, Buster. Yuh know how to please me. Purty, green, printed paper—lots of it. Won't do no harm if there's a leetle yellow on the backs . . . Well!" he barked, breaking off. "Come on! Dig it outa there! Must be a heap more'n that measley little bundle—"

"Is all I kin find here," quavered Eph hurriedly.

"Then look harder! . . . No more at all? What the hell!" The bandit appeared puzzled, at a complete and disgruntled loss, having his own wary look. His face above the mask went red and hard. "Okay—I'll take what there is." He reached out. "Hand it here! . . . There's a good feller. Damned if yuh ain't all right, Ephie." His reckless humor appeared to return. "Few more years, an' yuh'll know how t' look after yore health with the best of 'em. A leetle mite jittery now—but you'll do."

He was already backing toward the door, vigilance sharpened against slips in a too-hasty retreat. Rigid, Sam watched his every move. He understood accurately the man's smooth and meaningless flow of chatter,

designed to ease the inevitable tension which leads to crashing action—usually fatal to someone; and at the same time to check and distract the probing, curious attentiveness of his victims, which sometimes observes too much.

Two more swift backward strides, and the robber paused in the door. Sam and Eph remained frozen, waiting. "Jest hold that pose, boys," advised the outlaw jocularly. Then in a twinkling he was gone.

Sam relaxed, bringing his numb arms down slowly. His first act was to wipe his reddened brow afresh, thoughtfully. "Queer," he muttered, as if talking to himself. "Damned if it don't seem t' be gettin' even hotter." He paused then, staring at Eph sharply. A fleeting grin touched his mouth, and faded. "Yuh look pale, Ephie. But yuh done all right," he said with conviction.

Surprise touched Eph's face at this, for Sam's sincerity of tone was unquestionable. Despite the robber's grim humor, Sloan was quite sure he had seldom run across a more cold-blooded article. From the first, his fear had been lest the ruthlessness underneath should suddenly break through. For himself, he had been ready to take his chances. But Eph was young.

"Now, Ephie," Sam spoke aloud gently. "You're a sight sprier'n I am. Trot along an' break the news to Cohannon. Won't do no harm if yuh tell Sheriff Haley, too," he added in wry afterthought. "I ain't sure if it matters—"

Eph missed this reference concerning the character and worth of the county sheriff altogether, starting uneasily for the door. "Sure! Tell Mr. Cohannon I watched the store bein' robbed. That's the hardest part

of it," he exclaimed bitterly. But he hurried off. The scrape of his footsteps came back faintly.

Hobbling to the door in the silence, Sam stepped out on the porch to peer up-street. The tumbling smoke above the roofs had whitened and thinned, in a manner that could only indicate a fiercer blaze. The crackling of unleashed flames was louder. Sam's brows drew down.

"There's hell t' pay up there 'bout now. Won't nobody be back from that for awhile," he muttered. "Eph'll be lucky if he locates Cash inside of half an hour."

Returning to the store, he was about to sink to a comfortable seat on a box when without any advance warning whatever a gunshot roared outside. Sam rose as though on springs. He took two hurried steps back toward the door, and halted dead.

"Un-uh." His murmur was grave. "Somethin' tells me I ain't wanted out there right now—"

It seemed to him that the marksman could only be the holdup man. He gulped at the thought that young Eph might have been cut down. Then he shook his head, if with considerable puzzlement. Eph, he was aware, had had plenty of time to get away. Then at whom had the stray shot been fired?

Sam was worrying this when crunching footsteps beyond the door drew him taut. The sound approached, and he drew his Colt, ready for whatever might come.

Stepping in the door, Pat Stevens found him crouched, gun in hand, an expression of scowling amazement on his stubbly face. The sixgun lowered as Sloan slowly straightened.

"That you doin' the shootin' out yonder?" Sam growled.

Pat's eyes leaped to his face. "I thought maybe it was you—" His gaze ran about the store investigatingly. "Anybody else here?"

Sam shook his head. "Eph an' me was here five minutes ago, when the place was stuck up." Briefly he told what had happened.

As he listened, Pat's glance leaped to the sugar barrel. It appeared undisturbed. "Did the hombre get anythin'?" he demanded sharply.

"Two-three hundred out of the safe," Sam supplied. "What else would Cash Cohannon have here—?"

Pat opened his lips to speak, and waited. Yet another pair of feet scraped outside. Stevens's eyes were blandly watchful as Sheriff Haley came clumping in at the door.

"You two, eh?" Brad took them in inscrutably.

Before Pat could reply, a stamping sounded and Eph, the clerk, came hurrying in, his look deeply worried. He appeared not to pay overmuch attention to the men here. "Where's the boss?" he got out unsteadily, chest heaving from his haste. "I found Mr. Cohannon a few minutes ago, an' told him what happened! He sent me t' look for you, Sheriff. Didn't yuh see him?"

Haley's nod was portentous. "I saw him, boy. He's layin' right outside here, at the end of the porch—shot through the head!"

Eph's exclamation of horror was covered by Stevens's swift question. "Hold on, Haley. Are you sure of that?" From his tone, much depended on the answer.

The lawman met him deliberately, with a bleak re-

gard. "You ought to know, Stevens. Because I'm satisfied you shot him," he rumbled in flat challenge.

Pat's lips twisted with incredulous disgust. "Sure of that too, are *yuh*? And I suppose, while we're about it, I'm the man who stuck up the store here as well—" Scorn edged the lightly spoken words.

Haley's expression now was too grim to be called a smile. "*You're* sayin' it, Stevens," he pointed out thinly. "But I'll second the motion. I think you're exactly the hombre that did the trick!"

Pat half-turned away in a gesture expressive of contempt, only to pause. "Dammit, man! Sam was here with Eph when it happened! Ask Sloan if he thinks I'm the man—"

"Ha!" Brad leapt on that with curt satisfaction. "He'd be liable t' give *yuh* away, wouldn't he?—when it's my conviction the two of *yuh* planned it together!"

Sam vented an explosion of wrath. "How big a fool kin *yuh* be, Haley?" he snapped. "Ezra will tell *yuh* I was runnin' to the fire with him ten minutes ago, when I turned my ankle an' had to stop. I s'pose I was jest cute enough t' go that far on purpose!"

"And furthermore, maybe you'll give me one good reason why *I* should have shot Cohannon?" Pat struck in, shortly.

"Sure. I can do that." Haley's manner was stout, his tone one of utter conviction. "Yuh bumped into him comin' out of the store, Stevens! Once he recognized *yuh*, you didn't have no choice. Bing—and the evidence against *yuh* would soon be six feet under, with no more danger . . . Or so you thought!" he concluded the crisp accusation. "But I've got yore number at last, Stevens! This time *yuh* went too far!"

17.

IF BRAD thought he had Stevens checkmated with this blistering fire of interlocking charges, he was disillusioned before he could buttress his position further with his fantastic logic.

Pat stood smiling dourly as he ceased to speak, shaking his head slowly and firmly.

"It won't do, Haley," he declared with smooth assurance. "Sloan and I were willin' to play along with this crazy talk long enough to see just how far you'd go. But it must occur even to you that there's no chance of gettin' this town to swallow any such wild yarn as that. It just won't wash, and well yuh know it!"

The lawman pretended fierce indignation. "Wal, I could expect yuh to try talkin' yore way out of the jackpot yuh find yoreself in!"

Pat's confidence was not shaken in the slightest. "No, I'll reason my way out of it. And you'll listen, Haley, like it or not—"

"Sure! I'll listen—through the bars of yore cell," Brad retorted thinly. "When I happen t' feel like it, that is!" Already he was hauling out of his pocket those jangling manacles which seemed to pass, with him, for a symbol of unassailable authority. "Just try to resist," he warned, "and I'll have every law enforcement officer in the territory on yore tail!"

Perfectly capable of whatever brand of resistance might be called for, this time Pat did not have to resort to it, his substitute being an example of the kind of luck for which he was famous. Seeing a stout figure trudge by in the street, he stepped quickly to the door before Haley was able to interfere.

"Ab!" Pat called, jerking his head in a signal. "I want yuh to come here a minute."

"Blast it, Stevens! There's no point in draggin' others into this," the Sheriff raged cholericly. He would have snapped the cuffs on in a jiffy, but Pat coolly thrust him aside. Ab Keeler, the rotund banker, came puffing into the store, forcing a moment's pause. He seemed surprised on finding them here.

"What's up, boys?" he wheezed, his white brows arched high with curiosity.

Sam Sloan quickly acquainted him with the circumstances of the robbery. "A shot blasted outside a minute or two afterwards—an' Haley here says Cohannon's layin' by the corner of the porch with a hole in his head. He's accusin' Pat Stevens an' me of both jobs," Sam wound up with a rush.

The banker's previous surprise was as nothing to the blank astonishment etched on his ruddy features by this announcement. "Wal, I swan to man," he gasped, staring. "What are you sayin' t' all this, Stevens?"

Pat's gesture of contemptuous disposal was masterly. "Glad yuh happened along, Ab. I want you to hear this," he said quietly. "It's my contention that this whole business, includin' the fire, and the stickup, and even Cohannon's murder, hooks up directly with that bank job!"

The words created a sensation. Haley scoffed loudly, and even Ab Keeler was slow to accept the idea.

"Reckon yuh mean that fire was deliberately set to toll folks away for an easy holdup. I get that," he said in his panting voice. "Where does the bank come into it?"

Pat's smile was bleak. "I needn't remind you that your money hasn't been turned up yet. Turk Marble never got it, Ab—or he wouldn't be still in Powder Valley." He took them all in with a shrewd glance. "I'm suggestin' that *somebody* thought that missin' loot was right in this store!"

Keeler's jaw dropped, and even the sheriff started as if he had been struck. The banker was the first to break silence, whirling his bulk on Sloan and Eph.

"You two were here," he almost barked. "Did that hombre get the bank's money?"

Sam only grunted his stolid amazement at the question. But Eph was more articulate.

"N-nosir," he stuttered. "He couldn't of! It wasn't in the safe anyhow, Mr. Keeler—"

Brad Haley glared triumphantly at Pat. "So much for your looney story!" he rumbled harshly.

"Wal, hold on." Keeler was more cautious, made hard by what he had personally at stake. "If that hold-up expected t' find twenty thousand dollars here, an' didn't, *that* would sure explain his shootin' Cohannon. Probably he was plumb fit t' be tied, an' he took his revenge on Cash—"

"Poor reasonin', Keeler," Haley scoffed. "Nobody at all but Stevens places that money here in Cash's store. I'm forced t' conclude it's only another of his pipe-dreams!"

The words struck Pat sharply, recalling to mind a fact which, in the accelerating sequence of events, he had overlooked until this moment. He made the most of it.

"The fact is, Haley, you're probably to be excused for that attitude," he declared blandly. "The robber couldn't have realized what he was doin'. But when he shot Cohannon—if he shot him—he left just one person in the world who might know exactly where that bank currency is. Me."

They gazed at him, transfixed. Ab's voice deserted him; he could speak only in a whisper.

"Good gravy, boy!" he wheezed. "Yuh mean—yuh know where it is right now?"

Pat was unaffectedly glad for the presence of a responsible citizen at this moment. He ignored Haley's officious order to produce the money at once.

"I hope you've got a record of serial numbers or somethin', to identify those bills beyond question?" he asked.

"I'm only prayin' for the chance," Keeler assured him earnestly. "For heaven's sake, Stevens! If yuh got any idea where my bank's money is, don't keep me on the hook no longer!"

Pat nodded. The moment had come when his guessing of the night before had to be right. But no one could have read his doubt in his actions as he moved toward the sugar barrel.

"Get the scoop, Eph," he directed, removing the barrel cover. "We may have to excavate—"

Eph produced the desired article. Tentative prodding in the sugar produced no immediate result. Pat

called for bags and began to remove the barrel's contents.

"You're stallin', Stevens!" Brad accused heavily. The lawman appeared restless and somehow desperate of manner. He may have guessed that Pat had somehow divined the truth; certainly he must have known the hidden money was somewhere in the store. "This is all horseplay for the nitwits! It won't get *yuh* anywheres!"

Pat ignored him, probing yet deeper. "Hold it! What's this?" His grunt was muffled, coming from inside the barrel. A moment later he straightened, tugging a gunnysack out. Everyone stared in fascination, struck silent. Loose sugar rained to the floor, but it was not even noticed. Keeler almost snatched the sack from Pat's hands.

"Wh-what's in it, Stevens?" he gasped, white and red by turns, suspense cruelly wrenching his feelings. "For God's sake, dump it out!"

Pat's answer was to thrust in an arm and come up with a fat bundle of green bills. A twenty showed on top. Unquestionably a sizable amount of money had been cached here.

"Gosh all Friday!" Sam Sloan breathed in awe, staring. "It *is* the bank's money, Stevens!" His face was scarlet at the thought of the dynamite lying here while he had so innocently faced the bandit. "Yuh son-of-a-gun! How long've *yuh* knowed this?"

"I was pretty sure of it last night." Pat was grinning now with sheer relief. "But it *was* somethin' of a guess at that. Lucky guess, huh?" Emptying the sack methodically as he spoke, he found his deepest pleasure in stacking its bundled contents in Sheriff Haley's petrified

arms—aware that, under Ab Keeler's jealous eye, it was perfectly safe there. Brad's nonplused expression revealed his inner writhings. How he must feel, holding all that money—and unable to claim an illicit share of it, as he had hoped!

"Quite a load, Haley." Pat smiled. "Libby'll be glad to hear of this—for the sake of your job."

Brad stiffened at that name, something like secret shame tearing his vitals. Pat wondered if there was yet any hope for the rehabilitation of this man.

"Now's the time for you to prove yourself," he proceeded levelly. "Maybe you can even grab the *hombres* behind this rotten deal—"

"By grab, if I only could—!" Haley struggled with himself fiercely. "Cohannon's dead, Stevens—if he *was* one of 'em," he said gruffly. "How'll I lay finger on the others? Can *yuh* tell me?"

That final query seemed only a belated evidence of his deep guile. None knew better than he who the guilty men were! But a further shove in the right direction might help.

"Well, it seems to've been a double-cross deal all around." Pat was pleasant. "That ought to afford an openin' of some sort. In fact, I believe Sloan here has some kind of an idea who that stickup artist might've been—"

"Wal, now, mebby we're gettin' somewheres at that!" Brad appeared to grab at whatever slim hope there was, ignoring the significance of Pat's double meaning, which could scarcely have escaped him. He peered at Sam questioningly. "Not Kyle Kershaw, by any chance—?"

Aware that Pat was playing some hand of his own, Sam delayed. Pat supplied the answer before he could say the wrong thing.

"No—it's another man, Haley. A pretty shrewd hombre. In fact, I'm convinced we'll have to play it smart to get anywhere near him."

Brad turned this over ponderingly. He was feeling his way forward with extreme care. Few men were called upon to tread between abysses as he was doing.

"How?" he demanded succinctly.

"I've a plan I think'll work." Pat proceeded evenly. "Your part is simple enough. Gather a small, safe posse, Haley—not more than two or three men, say—and take them to Trap Mountain. I'll toll our man out to yuh, givin' him to understand that Cohannon cached the loot there. And you can grab him."

Brad appeared to wrestle with feverish wrath as the unlovely picture built up. "I got to hand it to yuh, Stevens, for bein' smart. But I'm responsible for the law here. I insist on knowin' who this bad hombre is," he blared, snorting fire.

Pat's answer was curtly blunt. He meant it to be, hoping to break the back of Haley's resistance at last.

"Why, it's Dude Buell, Haley," he said. "Who else?"

The lawman froze. Not idly had he remarked Stevens's sharpness of penetration only a moment before. His glare said that he could have murdered Pat now out of fear for himself.

"Dude Buell," he almost groaned, looking blindly away. "It—seems almost impossible t' believe." He gathered himself together then. "Wal, I'll pick out one or two safe men, Stevens, an' play yore hunch. I owe

that much to Keeler here . . . But I ain't goin' out there t' Trap Mountain an' wait," he stipulated, with firm severity. "I insist on pickin' up Dude with yuh. I got t' be sure he don't give yuh the slip!"

Pat deliberated briefly. The sheriff's insistence might well create difficulties; but with Libby in mind, he welcomed this chance to keep an eye on her father during the crucial hours of this day.

"All right, Brad," he agreed. "Go pick up your men first. Something'll have to be done about Cohannon. Tell the coroner about it if he's in his office. Sloan'll help Ab get this money safely back to the bank—and I'll be busy for a matter of ten minutes or so. I'll meet yuh in front of the bank later. Right?"

It was so arranged. As Haley hurried off, Pat helped Sam and the excited banker to stuff the recovered money back in the sack.

"When you've seen Ab to the bank," he told Sam in an undertone, "I want yuh to pick up Ez. Slip out to Trap Mountain on the sly and watch. But don't make any mistakes till I get there!" he emphasized sharply.

Sam nodded. "Where'll you be?"

"Oh—around." Pat would vouchsafe no more. "Don't forget, now. A heap may depend on you two."

With Sam and Keeler gone, he lingered on Cohannon's porch, looking over Cash's body thoughtfully. No pity for the man stirred in him; Cohannon had played a crooked game and lost. He was simply a symbol of what the turn of the cards might hold for others in this grim game it was too late to halt.

Turning to the street, he caught sight of Dude Buell striding briskly into his real-estate office. There seemed

something furtively hurried about the man's actions. Could he have been warned?

Pat had staked at least a portion of his success on Brad Haley's belatedly seeing the error of his ways. Not by accident had he reminded the Sheriff of his daughter. Collusion between Brad and Dude Buell now would spell his inevitable doom. Haley must see the net closing in. Only a fool would not try hard to draw back—and Brad was not altogether a fool. The gods alone knew whether he might yet be in time.

Still Pat thought a close watch should be kept on the man during the next critical half-hour. Much depended on whom Haley picked for his aides, and Pat counted on his innate wit to select the right ones.

"I'll get hold of Kize Wagner," he thought. "Haley could stumble over him without suspectin' anythin'—"

Suiting action to the words, he made for Wagner's small place on the edge of town. Kize wasn't there, and Pat was coming away, striding through this deserted tangle of barns and back lanes, when the strike of hoofs on hard-packed soil just ahead halted him in his tracks.

Around the corner of a shed, riding warily, came three hard-faced men. They were unmasked and tense, despite their callousness, and he had no difficulty in recognizing Turk Marble and his henchmen. Seeing the lone man in their path they drew rein. Pat was the first to open his lips, severity lurking just under the cool words.

"Well, Marble! This is quite a surprise—"

"Mebby it's more of one for me than it is for you." Speaking equably, Turk seemed to find pleasure in thus obscuring his real meaning.

Pat's nod was careless. "It could turn out that way. What is it you're after here?"

"Did have some notion of lookin' up the sheriff," Marble allowed. The laziness of his answer carried a chill.

This time Pat shook his head, it seemed pityingly. "Still harping on that old double-cross deal, are yuh?"

"Could be." Turk's wary eyes narrowed perceptibly. "If I was you, Stevens, I wouldn't bother worryin' about it any—"

"Oh, I'm not particularly bothered. It's your hide I was thinking about," retorted Pat. "Why should it trouble me, if it doesn't you?"

Marble fingered this gingerly, exchanging glances with Shoshone and Keno. "Mebby I don't just take yore meanin'," he returned craftily.

"It's simple enough." Pat was stern. "Things began to pop this morning, as a matter of fact. The bank money's been recovered, for one thing," he informed them casually, "and they're after Buell now. Throwin' a posse together . . . I don't expect to influence yuh any; but I think if I were you, Marble, I'd clear out of the country without losin' time about it. You," he added grimly, "wouldn't want to turn out next on the list!"

Turk stared at him with dourly pouted lips. Doubtless the knowledge that something momentous was astir in town had already encouraged him to ride in so boldly. Not for a second did he dream of doubting this calm-faced man's words.

"Thanks, feller." He jerked a nod. "Yuh been square with me accordin' to yore lights. Reckon I can take a hint, if it is against my inclination," he grinned.

"It's far more than a hint." Pat refused to allow any misunderstanding in the matter. "What your dealings with Brad Haley might be, of course I don't know. But if anythin' happens to him, Marble, and I have reason to believe you're behind it, you and me won't be speakin'!"

"Haw, haw!" Turk pretended to find the remark vastly funny. "I get it, Stevens. Yuh mean you *or* me, don't yuh? 'Won't be speakin'!'" he repeated relishingly. "Damned if that ain't good!"

"Is it?" Pat was noncommittally bland. "Probably not for one of us, Marble. And I don't *think* it'll be me."

"Wal, a feller has to think, now an' again." The outlaw appeared cheerful. "Thanks for remindin' me again of my real business, anyhow, Stevens. It don't look like there's anything more for me here." He turned his horse, jerking his chin to his confederates. "Reckon we'll drift, boys. I wouldn't want t' interfere with that posse none—"

Pat had been careful to give him no notion of who he might expect to find in it. "I don't believe they'll find their profit in ridin' beyond the edge of the valley—if that helps any," he tossed out significantly.

Marble winked over his shoulder. "Wouldn't wonder if it does. I git the general idea, anyway. So long, Stevens. We probably won't be seein' yuh!"

They jogged back in the direction of the open range, disappearing presently behind the barns and sheds.

18.

SHERIFF HALEY was standing in front of the bank with Al Henshew when Stevens reached the spot, a few minutes after Turk Marble's departure. By no means discomfited, Pat looked the hotelman over with fleeting care. Henshew was armed; besides his belt gun, a carbine slanted in his thin hand. He was ready for action. The glance Brad bent on Pat was diffident.

"I found Al, here," he said gruffly. "Talked him into the job. But men we can trust just ain't handy, Stevens—"

It was significant that he did not bother to ask the whereabouts of Sam and Ezra. Pat passed woodenly over the omission, seeming to fall in with the game. Standing there, he glanced over toward the bank.

"Well, you'll need more than one good man," he pointed out musingly. "Let's see. Art Bickle's no ball of fire, but he's able-bodied—and sure to be found. Step in and tell Keeler we need Bickle. Tell Ab it's an emergency."

Henshew glanced at Pat sharply as if striving to read his mind. He said nothing as Haley stepped into the bank. In only a moment or two he emerged once more, the cashier at his heels, stuffing a bank gun into his hip pocket.

"You fellows get started right away," Pat instructed evenly. "Haley and myself'll follow before too long, and we want yuh to be sure and be at the mountain."

Bickle did not so much as look at Pat, glancing guardedly in the lawman's direction, a closed expression on his thin severe face. "We'll have to ride," he muttered, as if wishing mightily it could be avoided.

Not even Brad could suppress a wry smile at this. The cashier's complete disinterest in horseflesh was notorious. "Step down to the livery and pick up a couple of broncs," he told Henshew curtly.

Brushing this aside, Pat soon saw the possemen mounted, tossing on saddles and tightening the cinches himself. Art Bickle took the bridle rein from his hand with averted eye.

Haley and Pat stood watching the pair jog away side by side. Knowing as he did that Brad had deliberately maneuvered the selection of his co-conspirators, Pat would have given much to have overheard what the sheriff had said to them. Their true mission seemed plain. Preposterous to suppose them remotely interested in Dude Buell's capture! They could only hope to be in at his own death.

Something of this must have been in Haley's badgered mind as well, for a vague sadness touched his blocky face. Pat gave him little leisure for reflection, however. "Well, Haley," he said with cool decisiveness, "we'll go after Buell now."

Brad moved with the leaden reluctance of a doomed man. "Better get it over with," he sighed. A flash of curiosity returned to him then. "What'll yuh say to him, Stevens?"

Pat's glance searched him appraisingly. "Let's not have any mistakes," he warned crisply. "I'm all innocence, Haley, at least till we get Dude out to Trap Mountain. Appeal to his public spirit, maybe. He may fall in with it—but it'll be touch and go, I know that . . . Put on your best poker face," he advised studiously, "and Buell will never suspect yuh of guile."

Haley's burden appeared briefly to lighten as they approached Buell's office. His eyes sharpening, manner firm and alert, he was almost irate when his daughter Libby suddenly put in an appearance. The girl was unable to conceal her agitation on finding him in Pat Stevens's company. She must have read something of its grave portent.

"Where are you going, Dad?" she asked directly, struggling at the same time to manage a smile for Pat.

"Never mind." Brad was short with her. "Go home, girl. I'm busy just now—"

"You're heading for Mr. Buell's office," she accused constrainedly, ignoring his brush-off.

"Yes—dammit! Any reason I can't go there, miss?" He was almost choleric. "Run along, now, and don't bother us no more."

With stricken face, Libby halted and watched them pass on, scarcely reassured by the quiet smile Pat gave her.

A few more steps carried the men to Buell's door. A glance through the windows revealed no one at all inside. Pat coolly swung the door back and stepped in, with Haley at his back. Brad glanced about hurriedly with lengthening face.

"Yuh waited too long, Stevens! Dude's wise," he half-croaked. "He's flew the coop!"

If his dismay was feigned, it was acting of a high order. Weighing this, Pat had his own unhurried look around. There was no tumbling about of Buell's belongings to indicate a hasty flight, and it was the most encouraging sign he had yet run across.

"I don't believe it," he contradicted serenely. "Buell might very well consider this a good time to keep out of sight, though. Probably he's gone out to his ranch."

The pathetic willingness with which the lawman grasped at this possibility seemed further encouraging proof of his sincerity. "Let's go, Stevens!" he urged agitatedly. "I can't wait t' know if you're right—"

Pat nodded. He lost no time in reaching his horse, and Brad was waiting when he got back. They set off at once, taking the Hopewell Junction road for the Bar Bell. Haley had little to say as they pushed the horses, seeming to struggle with his own thoughts. The time came when he could no longer contain his apprehensions.

"Do yuh still aim to toll Buell out to Trap Mountain?" he asked tersely.

Pat had been waiting for this opening. "Why not?"

Brad overcame his reluctance with the utmost difficulty. "It—won't be easy out there," he equivocated.

"I didn't expect it to be." Pat paused, with simulated severity. "Any reason for sayin' that, Haley?"

Brad was sweating now. He drove on doggedly. "This may come as a jolt, Stevens. But I've reason t' distrust both Henshew an' Art Bickle—"

Pat's start of surprise was a masterpiece. "You can't mean they're in cahoots with Dude Buell—" he exclaimed.

"I mean they're probably aimin' t' knock yuh off!"

Haley's countenance was deep red. "No other chance would have persuaded 'em to go out there, Stevens!"

It was confession in full; and the simple truth as well, as Pat was only too well aware. From the expression on his face, however, it could only appear that the news delighted him.

"Good for you, Haley! Libby can be proud of yuh," he approved, perfectly satisfied now that Brad had turned his corner into the straight. The heartening knowledge was not the least of Pat's triumphs; yet he was careful to cover up smoothly. There could be no harm in sparing Haley's self-lacerated pride. "I'll keep the warnin' in mind. But I've little doubt we're headed for a real clean-up today!"

Brad said no more. Yet he held his head straighter. Sneaking admiration for Pat Stevens, long suppressed, made him glad to be riding with this man at the last.

Wariness descended on them as they neared Buell's Bar Bell ranch. Treacherous as a wolf, Dude was perfectly capable of downing them both with a rifle as they jogged into range. But the place lay silent as they rode up to the edge of the yard.

"Keep an eye peeled," Pat murmured. "I'm only guessin' at Buell—but I *know* Kramer and Kin Martin were holed up here."

Brad nodded, his keen eyes slitted. "There's one of 'em now—dead drunk, it looks like from here," he hazarded, indicating a tousled heap lying in the ranch yard, not far from the back porch of the ranch house.

Pat grunted, staring. For once he was in no haste to make up his mind. "You may be wrong, Brad," he said slowly. "The smell of rotgut draws flies—but not that many."

Deliberately dismounting, they dropped their reins and started across the yard, the sound of their steps startlingly loud in this tense quiet. Pat was first to reach the inert body. He gazed down, lips drawn in a thin straight line.

“Wal, I’m tee-totally damned!” Sheriff Haley vented the involuntary ejaculation as if he had been struck, his voice petering out weakly.

The upturned face into which they looked was that of Dude Buell, spread-eagled here with lax arms outflung. He was dead, his bold face carved in deep lines of final agony. A knife-handle jutted starkly from his arched ribs.

So complete and final did the shock of this discovery seem that it was a couple of seconds before either read the meaning of the sounds which fell on their unheeding ears. Pat looked up, a raking scrutiny. Three mounted men came drifting around the corner of the Bar Bell house, Turk Marble in the lead, with Keno and Shoshone Thompson close behind him.

Marble drew rein near the motionless body and sat gazing down, a smug look lurking on his predatory features.

“Damnin’ evidence, Stevens!” There was gravel in his voice as he indicated with a thumb the knife in Buell’s side.

Pat glanced at him sharply. He leaned down then, having his careful look at the weapon. He saw what Turk meant. In the bone handle of the knife had been burned the initials *B.H.*

Haley discovered this at the same time. He flushed darkly with furious rage. “What’s the meanin’ of this?” he roared apoplectically.

"Your initials, Haley! Is it your knife?" inserted Pat quickly, hoping to forestall what he saw inevitably looming.

"Sure, it's mine! An' my own fault, I expect, if I lost it three days ago!" Brad was fierce. "I still aim t' know the meanin' of our findin' it here!"

Turk Marble regarded him with lazy care, his indolence as he lolled in the saddle crying a subtle warning.

"It means yore biggest mistake, Haley," he threw out, with vitriolic calm. "It was all right t' treat Keno an' Shoshone rough in a pinch, but you an' the boys shouldn't've crossed *me* on that bank job! Couldn't yuh guess I wouldn't stand for it?"

Brad froze, blanching, as he saw himself finally and treacherously betrayed in his turn. But his cold nerve held.

"All right, Marble," he choked. "This is the show-down! You finished Dude, plannin' t' square with him and plant it on me! It means nothin'. What you couldn't see was that I'd decide to play the game square!" He took a deep breath, his manner resolute. "Throw down yore guns, Turk! I'm takin' yuh in!"

"Why, you cheap, two-timin' chiseler!" blazed Marble, his cruel face congested. "Take me in, will yuh? You couldn't arrest a cold in the head! Don't run away with the idee that, because yuh got Stevens there behind yuh, I won't treat you the same as I done yore friend Dude! I ain't been trackin' yuh down for anythin' else!" He was working himself up to a fine frenzy now. "Turn tail, yuh yaller dog, an' hunt yore hole in a hurry!"

Cocked at hair-trigger, acutely conscious that this

flow of bile was designed purely to cover up smashing action, Pat read the outlaw's deadly intention. He saw Turk stiffen. Before Marble's gun was out of the leather, Pat broke his shoulder with a lightning shot. He reckoned without the owlhoot's cold, headlong will, however. Reeling in the saddle, his face gone grey, Turk whipped out a second Colt left-handed. It roared flatly.

Brad Haley straightened as if running into an invisible obstruction. Eyes batting, striving to give utterance, he seemed first to swell, and then abruptly deflate. Turning like a felled tree, he crashed to the dust.

Pat angrily threw a second slug at Marble, which missed, though his battered hat flew off. The horses were dancing now; Shoshone and Keno both had their try at Stevens, without better luck. For a moment hot lead flew about the ranch yard. Making Stevens dodge and duck, it hindered his own accuracy. Before he could find cover behind his own mount, or the corner of the house, the outlaws whirled their ponies about and, supporting Marble as best they could, raced for the open.

Pat steadied his gun and fired after them deliberately, hoping to down one of the horses. If he scored a hit it was not evident, for the trio presently disappeared as they swerved to put the house between him and themselves.

Forgetting them for the moment, Pat dropped on one knee beside the Sheriff. "Is it bad, Haley?" he demanded.

Brad was conscious. That he was already failing fast could be told from his whitening features, always so ruddy. He managed a weak nod. "Plumb through—the

brisket, Stevens," he whispered huskily. "I had it—comin', but I—done my best . . ." He slumped, a wheezing sigh issuing from his relaxed lips.

After straightening him out, Pat rose, his bronze face sober. Haley's string was indeed played out and he had paid the price of his folly. Pat had had his own share in this ruthless denouement, and he was facing the cost to himself when a slight movement across the ranch yard caused him to glance over there.

Will Kershaw stepped slowly out of the barn door, to advance heavy-footed. The look on his face revealed that he had seen it all. Ignoring Dude Buell as he stepped across his body, Will looked down at Libby's father for a moment in silence. The glance he raised to Stevens was like a knife.

"You must've been mighty sure of yourself, Stevens, comin' here all alone," he said harshly. "I see yuh managed to look after yoreself all right, at that. But what'll yuh be sayin' to that girl?"

Pat knew what he must be feeling, having seen death dealt swiftly and surely, perhaps more than once, with no means of preventing it. Moreover, Will's feeling about Libby Haley had grown all unawares, till now he no longer attempted to hide it even from himself.

"Neither more nor less than you'll be sayin' to her, Kershaw." Pat's gentle tone was unruffled. "It's the breaks of the game, boy. All the same, she can be right proud of Brad . . . Buell double-crossed Marble, bringin' him here to front for a bank holdup, and got his pay fast. Haley was attemptin' to take Turk in for the killin'. At the last," he emphasized smoothly, "Brad met his duty fair and square. If his luck ran out, he'd be the last to complain. He can rest easy now."

Will gulped. "You mean Sheriff Haley was pullin' for—law and order, when he—" he stumbled.

"None harder," Pat affirmed. "You can safely assure Libby of that, and I'll back you up."

The words heartened Will considerably. For several years he had been old enough to know there were worse things than death. He knew what it was, as well, to live with a black sheep in the family. So implacable was the bitter knowledge of his own burden that he met Pat's look squarely.

"What'll *yuh* be doin' about Jap?" he got out steadily.

Pat shrugged. "Haven't found time to so much as think about him," he evaded smoothly. "With Buell flushed into the open, and Marble out for revenge, we had to work fast. Right now," he proceeded levelly, "the rest of Dude's crowd is waitin' for us at Trap Mountain—loaded for bear."

"In that case I'm with *yuh*," exclaimed Will grimly. "Only—" He waved a hand at the bodies. "What'll we do about this?"

Pat scratched his head. "Where *are* those two old rawhides?" he countered shortly.

"Martin and Kramer? Cowerin' in the barn, Stevens—or they was."

"Get 'em out here."

Kershaw moved into the barn, to return after a moment with the two sheepish oldtimers in tow. Pat scrutinized them sternly. "Hidin', eh?" he barked. "I can understand your slant, Kramer, if that's how you see things—workin' steady for this skunk. But how far will a man go for a couple of loose bucks?" He regarded Kin Martin witheringly.

"Don't git gay, Stevens! Dude threatened t' knock me off if I didn't hide out," Kin stoutly insisted. "I ain't sorry t' see him washed out. Alive, I wasn't foolin' with no pizen rattler like him!"

Pat's nod was curt. "Save the explanations. We'll let Kramer plant his boss—or do whatever he wants with him. You," he told Martin severely, "get yourself in town and notify Winters, or Ab Keeler, about the Sheriff. Mind, don't go blurtin' things to Libby now! Haley died in the line of duty. The boys'll see that she's taken care of, along with Brad."

"Sure, Stevens." Martin was not only acquiescent, but seemed relieved as well. "I'll do what yuh want. But I ain't sheddin' no tears over none o' these hombres. Reckon they was plumb askin' for a rough time. It may look," he proceeded shrewdly, "as if Turk Marble accommodated 'em, too. But I ain't foolin' myself about yore part in the business!" He cackled senilely, throwing Pat a sly look as he hobbled away to get up a horse.

"Shucks." Pat affected to give him no heed, turning to glance toward Will. "Come on, boy. Don't pay no mind to the gossip of that old fossil. A man only does what he has to do—and we've still got a chore or two before us. Let's go!"

Silently they strode to the waiting horses and set out.

19.

WATCHING to the rear as they rode, holding Turk Marble in the saddle by turns and crowding the horses hard in their flight from Buell's, Keno and Shoshone Thompson revealed better judgment and greater loyalty than might reasonably have been expected of them.

Not even the wounded outlaw leader was wholly aware of their object as they made hurriedly for a willow-fringed creek bottom a mile from the Bar Bell ranch. They intended to cleanse and bind his smashed shoulder as best they could, knowing he would be incapable of proceeding farther without speedy attention.

So intent were the grizzled pair on possible pursuit, moreover, that it came as a jolt when they observed a man jogging out of the willows dead ahead and advancing directly toward them. Only the fact that Keno's arms were busy prevented him from throwing lead before either of them took time to identify the man.

"Hold it, Keno," Shoshone exclaimed gruffly, his tension relaxing slightly. "That's Kershaw—"

Jap came close in a rush, seeing quickly that something was radically wrong. "What happened, Marble?" he demanded swiftly. "Looks like yuh got in a jam!"

Turk took him in with heavy, burning eyes. "If I did, it was none of Dude Buell's makin', boy—nor Haley's

neither! I got both of *them*, dead to rights," he growled.

Jap started fiercely. "Wal, now," he burst out richly. "Then that's three of 'em! . . . But you're hurt bad, Marble." Concern roughened his voice briefly. "What'll yuh do?"

"Git out of the way, Jap!" Keno could be hard when he chose. "We're gittin' Turk to the creek, there, where we can fix his shoulder—"

Jap did not immediately comply, however. "*Who did that?*" From his working mouth, he appeared to divine what the answer would be. Shoshone obliged with terse brevity.

"Pat Stevens—damn him!"

Jap's face tightened. "An' you're figurin' on stoppin' *here*? Yuh fools—that Stevens hombre is sheer hell with the stopper pulled out. He's dynamite! He'll be on yuh here before yuh can say knife." He examined Marble for a second with shrewd impersonality. "Keep goin'! He can stand it as far as the Tumblin' K. I'll force the old man t' stall Stevens off, if necessary, an' after he's taken care of, yuh can pack Marble over the pass, where he can lay low till he gets well."

Turk's harassed henchmen exchanged dubious glances. Well knowing they were not yet out of trouble, they had to think fast; and Jap's proposal offered at least a plausible avenue of escape.

"Let's git started, then!" Shoshone exclaimed nervously. "We ain't gittin' nowheres dickerin'!"

Jap was prompt enough to fall in as they started off. With an extra man they could keep a closer watch to the rear; and Jap took his turn as well at supporting the

wounded outlaw, visibly weakening as the minutes passed. Marble was making rough going of it, the motion of his horse even at a moderate pace causing him repeatedly to grimace with pain. But he had sand, the roughest jolt failing to wrench a groan out of him.

Critically gauging his condition, Jap entertained private doubts of whether the man would succeed in surviving his injury. Already Marble was markedly feverish, and growing grumpily irritable. His color was bad and his gaze glassy. Probably he was the sole one of the four who did not so much as bother to heave a sigh of relief when they reached the mouth of Trap Canyon, and the rocky walls closed in about them protectingly. It seemed doubtful if he knew where he was.

Jap pushed on to the fore as they neared his father's ranch. Fully aware of what they might find waiting in the way of a welcome, all his predatory attributes were in the ascendant, eyes glittering, his face hawklike and set.

Not even he could have professed himself prepared for it when they rode up to the edge of the ranch yard and saw through the fringed pines, the girl standing in the open before the house. Jap halted so abruptly, staring in her direction, that the others instinctively followed suit.

"What goes on here, Kershaw?" Keno bristled suspiciously, tightening up in a flash. "That's Haley's girl—"

Jap's slow nod was grim. "So I see . . . I'm only wonderin'," he muttered tightly, "if my nosy brother can be very far away—with her here."

"Dang the girl!" exploded Shoshone forcefully. "We cain't stall now, with Turk in this condition!"

Jap pushed on, followed doggedly by the others. It required both his cohorts now to support Marble's sagging bulk in the saddle, but they raised a defense of sorts with the play of obsidian, malignant eyes. Libby turned to watch, petrified, as they pressed forward. Giving her one deadly glance, Jap thereafter ignored her, keeping a strict watch all about the place as if guarding against sudden surprise.

As they approached the girl's position a roar sounded from the cabin door behind her, and old Kyle's wrathful visage appeared.

"You, Jap!" he bawled, with truculent heat. "What're yuh doin' here ag'in with that scum?"

"Shut up, Pa." Brazenly dismounting, Jap was almost cool. "This is once yore yellin' don't count. Jest see that yuh don't get my dander started!"

Kyle's blistering eye picked up Turk Marble's condition on the fly, taking in the bloody splotch covering his shoulder. It could not deter him, his bilious countenance swelling poisonously.

"Git back on that hoss!" he bellowed furiously. "Don't come here, I don't care if yuh have got troubles! Yuh drank, an' fought, an' stole, yuh robbed the bank with Marble, an' now I learn yuh killed Cohannon. It couldn't've been nobody else done it! I know yore black heart too well! . . . You're no more son o' mine, Jap Kershaw! Ride on yore way, an' leave me t' what little peace I got left t' hope for!"

Jap listened to this fiercely indignant tirade with a stolidity new to his mercurial nature. This time, clearly, an iron purpose informed his conduct which was not lightly to be dissuaded. Turning his back on his father

as if he had never heard, he stepped close to the outlaw leader's horse.

"Lift Marble down," he ordered. "Careful, now! We ain't got too much time for this—"

Kyle started out of the cabin door as if kicked. "Don't *yuh* do it!" he roared. "Marble ain't stoppin' here, an' you ain't nuther. You murderer!"

Jap ignored him till Turk was safely on the ground. The wounded outlaw's courageous eyes flashed up like daggers as they raked Kyle's livid face. He appeared about to speak. Then wearily he abandoned the effort. And only then did Jap turn to face his enraged parent, with fixed and deadly intent.

"Dammit, old man, be quiet!" he ripped out with thin venom. "You're blowin' about Cohannon. Hell! He was one o' the prime thieves—Dutch Springs Chapter—Royal Order o' Stinkers! Cash double-crossed me, *an'* Marble, *and* the boys here—an' now Turk's finished Buell. Don't *yuh* understand? Marble's done his job *an'* leavin' the country!"

He whirled at a suppressed cry of pain from Libby. The girl stood stricken, striving to master her fears, gazing in horror at these men.

"By Godfrey Dan, that goes for you, too!" Kyle hurled at his son, hate and shame gnawing his vitals. "You're leavin' now! I'm drivin' the pack of *yuh* off—"

Jap met him with flinty calm, stepping close in a twinkling, and slugging the rancher before he could snatch his gun out of the leather. The blow caught Kyle in the stomach, doubling him forward with a groan, his contorted face white as paper. The gun slipped from his limp fingers.

Kyle dropped, in a paralyzed condition; and with a sharp scream, quickly suppressed, Libby took an involuntary step toward him. Jap's regard halted her.

"Easy, sister." His voice rasped like sun-bleached bullhide. "He ain't dead yet—only lucky. Lucky I could reach him in time!" His mirthless, ragged-toothed grin flashed and faded. "Come on, Keno! Get to Marble's busted shoulder, can't yuh, an' let's have somethin' done about it!"

Already the outlaws had stretched the wounded man on the mat of pine needles and were examining his injury. "It's purty bad," Shoshone exclaimed gruffly, shaking his head. "Looks like the bones're all smashed up inside—"

"What's the matter with that girl swingin' this job?" demanded Keno, in genuine anxiety. "Women know more about such things—"

Libby shrank back as Jap briefly scrutinized her. She felt an unconquerable aversion for these callous men, and no desire whatever to succor their leader. As it turned out, Kyle saved her, panting and gagging wretchedly as he struggled up on one supporting hand. A long and painful acquaintance with gunshot wounds having been included in his experience, he brooded across at Marble's exposed upper body with implacable gaze.

"Won't make no difference what yuh do for that hombre," he managed, with difficulty. His tone was dogged and final. "Cart him to a sawbones or bury him in the woods—it's all one. Mark my words, he's slated t' turn up his toes with gangrene inside o' three days!"

Keno and Shoshone fell to cursing the old man lu-

ridly. This blast died away to leave an uncomfortable silence, in which fate itself seemed to hang over the uneasy group. Jap alone summoned sufficient brass to frown his father's prediction down with anything like conviction. Glaring his scorn as he kicked Kyle's Colt beyond his grasp, he was nevertheless privately convinced the other was right.

"That's out of yore hands," he told his father, with brutal indifference. "But we'll leave the girl out of it, all the same. Get Marble fixed up, you two, an' we'll be goin'!"

Keno gazed at him in unfeigned astonishment, but Jap proved adamant, some strange sense of inappropriateness reminding him that Turk Marble had after all been the death of Libby's father. Could the girl know the incontrovertible fact, she would never be induced to touch the outlaw; and even Jap uncomfortably drew the line at so sacrilegious an act.

But while Shoshone and Keno did their best with the now tossing outlaw chief, Jap was by no means done with the girl. "Get in the house an' scrape some grub together," he ordered roughly. "We'll be needin' it in the hills."

Libby complied, too dazed by what she had heard and guessed to seek refuge in flight. Jap was waiting for her when she emerged, keeping a sharp eye on his still smoldering but helpless parent.

"What brought you here today?" he snapped, pinning her where she stood. "Was that no-good Will around? Or are yuh expectin' him soon?"

"I don't know where Will is." Libby was brave, a desperate defiance showing through her chagrin. "Cer-

tainly I wish he *were* here now! Things might be different—”

“Come out from town, didn’t *yuh*?” Jap cut across her talk suddenly. “What’s doin’ there—or wouldn’t *yuh* know?”

“At least I know that Father and Mr. Stevens have set out after your dastardly friends!” she retorted coldly, stung into revealing more than she might have done in a cooler moment. “They were seeking Dude Buell—and I believe they intend riding to Trap Mountain also. A couple of men have already started for there—”

“Uh-uh. Posse, eh?” He was vastly casual. “They’ll never see us . . . Who were they, I wonder?” He added the curious afterthought, as if finding it relatively unimportant.

“It was Al Henshew, and Mr. Bickle, of the bank—” Libby got that far and caught herself, aghast. Bickle’s association with the bank alone had long since warned her that he was suspect. But it was too late now.

Jap appeared to swell with sinister portent, showing her a fiendish grin. “Well, well! So them two gents are out waitin’ at Trap Mountain, huh? An’ I suppose Stevens was aimin’ to trick Buell out there to be grabbed! . . . Boys, did *yuh* hear that?” he flung loudly at the outlaws. “It ‘pears like Dude has been catchin’ hell from both sides!” He seemed to find the discovery excruciatingly rich.

Still busy over Marble, Keno and Shoshone brushed his words aside impatiently. But Jap was informed with a new vigor of malign purpose, striding back and forth before his father with brisk impatience.

"Wal, now!" He was almost gloating. "What a chance t' kill a handful o' birds with one heave! . . . What about it, Keno? Shall we ride out for a little talk with Bickle an' that sour-pussed Henshew?"

"The hell with them two!" the bitter outlaw exclaimed angrily. "We're gittin' Turk outa here first, Kershaw—"

Jap glowered in indignant surprise. "Why, this is a chance in a thousand! I promised myself a lick at that pair! . . . Marble had *his* innings with Buell an' Haley—ask him what *he'd* do now," he rang out.

Kyle could restrain himself no longer. "Lay off, Jap!" he warned thunderously. "You're plannin' t' jump Henshew an' Bickle, an' then lay for Stevens! I tell yuh, that hombre's pure poison! He'll blow yore guts out through yore backbone!"

Jap's nervous stride increased almost to the point of frenzy. Manifestly he had no thought of giving over his deadly purpose, seeking some means of relatively safe accomplishment. His snakelike glance flicked Libby, darted restlessly away, and returned, to fasten hungrily on the girl. Suddenly he rushed forward.

"*You're* the answer to my little problem!" he whipped out exultantly. "Git up yore hoss, gal! You're goin' with me! Stevens won't be tossin' no lead in my direction with you in between!"

Libby's heart seemed to stop, then began to pound again heavily. "I—won't do it!" she got out, standing foursquare.

Jap slapped her smartly alongside the cheekbone, a blow that cracked like a pistol shot. "Git them female ideas out of yore head," he said. "I'm dealin' this hand,

an' don't yuh try to copper my play!" His almost insane glare caused her to drop her courageous glance, with a shudder. Gripping her firmly by the upper arm, he turned to the other outlaws.

"Last call, yuh handsome nursemaids! Marble's washed up. Will yuh leave him here an' go after them slick rats with me?"

Shoshone Thompson straightened abruptly and turned, a menacing figure. "Have yuh gone nuts, Kershaw? Go jump down the canyon, if you're plumb set on it! We're stickin' with Turk, an' that's final!"

"I'll do that—an' I hope yuh rot where yuh stand!" With a jerk, Jap swung Libby in between before they could take further offense. Keno glared, but he could not long drag his attention away from his stricken leader, whose grave condition was rapidly becoming apparent even to him.

"Let's go." Wheeling away, Jap swung the girl beside him and started at a swift shamble for his horse. Old Kyle, gradually recovering from the effects of his blow, would have protested vehemently; but in passing, Jap carelessly thrust a booted foot out and kicked him flat, chuckling callously at the rancher's groaning squeal of frustrated rage.

Securing his bronc, with his grip still clamped on the girl, Jap led the way down to the corral where her own horse waited.

"Get aboard," he growled. "We're headin' for Trap Mountain—an' it'll be you that suffers if we lose any time gettin' there!"

Numbly she mounted her horse and set out as directed. So much had happened so swiftly that she yet

scarcely grasped the full meaning of it all. But that terrible danger still threatened innocent lives here in Powder Valley, including her own, she thoroughly comprehended. Little less than a miracle could free her from the will of this hot-eyed madman whom she had detested from first sight, and now feared to the bottom of her soul.

Trap Mountain rose, a huge and majestic geological wreck, several miles to the west on the rising flank of the bold Culebras. So rugged was the terrain that even from here its tortured bulk could barely be seen, but the way to it led up the winding canyon above the ranch. Jap soon turned into a rocky trail which speedily carried them yet higher among the crags.

They were nearly a mile on their way, and almost out of the canyon at last, when the thin reverberating roar of gunfire drifted up to them from far below. Libby started fearfully at the sinister sound, but Jap only gazed backward and down with emotionless incuriosity.

"Too bad," he chortled grimly. "I won't even bother t' guess what that shootin' means—but whatever is happenin' to them fellers we left down there behind us, they can't claim they wasn't warned!"

They pressed steadily on, an occasional faint squeak of saddle leather the only sound besides the constant scrape and click of horse hoofs amongst the rocks.



20.

TRAP MOUNTAIN had been well named. Having the torn appearance of a badly eroded volcano, it was roughly a hollow cone upwards of a mile in diameter, its majestic inner walls a jumble of granite badlands. A single wild crack, broken through on one side, afforded the sole, partially hidden means of ingress. At this high altitude only a few stunted piñons tufted the rugged slopes, burned black and bare as iron under the deceptive serenity of a deeply blue sky, while sagebrush garnishing the open stretches seemed only to accentuate the loneliness.

Once the haunted bogey of a tribe of Utes, Trap Mountain was still the eagle-shadowed abode of rattlers and a cougar or two, for the most part left severely alone since it had never yielded any faint promise of mineral treasure. To the casual eye it presented only a bleak and deserted mausoleum of human hopes, with insufficient soil to support even an impoverished garden patch for some grizzled mountain recluse.

Reaching the mouth of the gloomy amphitheater in good time, Ezra and Sam Sloan took up a post in the rocks, having hid their horses. Because they knew two other men to be already at the mountain, with no intention of being discovered, their movements were

closely guarded. Carefully thrusting aside a gnarled piñon, Sam was scrutinizing the granite jumble for their quarry when the tall redhead beside him fastened an admonitory grip on his forearm.

"Hey-y! Yuh tryin' t' break my arm?" Sloan muttered as the other's grasp suddenly tightened.

"Psst! Get a load o' this," Ez whispered fiercely, indicating the narrow defile of the entrance.

A clip-clop of hoofs rang hollowly on the rocks. Sam stiffened abruptly as two riders broke into view.

"Holy mackerel! It's Jap Kershaw—" The little man almost hissed in his excitement. "But what in time is *he* bringin' Lib Haley here for?"

They saw at a glance that Jap was searching the tumbled rocks far and near as sharply as they had done. Jap did not offer to haul up near the entrance, however; he intended to thrust boldly on into the mountain wilderness, with the girl riding a few feet in the lead.

"Looks like he's usin' her for a shield—the skunk!" Sloan murmured shrewdly. He half-raised his carbine, only to lower it again. "What can we do, Ez?"

"Pray that Stevens gits here in a hurry," the lanky one returned succinctly.

Jap and the girl pushed slowly, inexorably on. After intermittently remaining in view for a time, they presently disappeared beyond tumbling rock piles. It seemed long before Ezra and Sam heard any further sound whatever. At last Sam turned once more toward the rocky entrance, his manner tense.

"Somebody else comin'—hell for leather!" he burst out.

They were vastly relieved to see Pat and Will Ker-

shaw break into the open, riding at a reckless pace. Sam stood up to wave wildly, and Stevens saw him at once. He motioned them down.

No one could mistake the stern desperation riding young Will's taut features, and Pat was curt. "Who's here, boys?" he rapped.

"Wal, Bickle an' Henshew're prowlin' the rocks some place," Ezra supplied. "An' Jap jest rode in with Libby—"

"Why didn't yuh grab the girl?" Will exclaimed.

The one-eyed man glanced at Pat soberly, and shrugged. "Thought mebby yuh'd prefer her still in one piece . . . Where's Haley? An' Buell, too, for that matter?"

Stevens gestured significantly. "Washed out, both of 'em." He pondered darkly. "The first problem is, how to comb Jap out of this jungle—"

An echoing, thinly attenuated *spang-g* interrupted them, running down from the lofty walls.

"That's Jap now!" Will jerked out. "Come on! He's located Al and Bickle, and they're smokin' each other! We'll have to yank Libby out of that mess!"

He and Stevens pushed on, warily watchful, and Sam and Ezra, after running for their mounts, soon caught up. Their own guns at the ready now, they looked keenly this way and that, the deceiving echoes of this vast hollow telling them nothing.

Again the spiteful gunfire racketed, quick and deadly. A moment later they despaired a running horse, frightened and riderless. Will cried out sharply. It was Libby's.

"My God, Stevens! She's been hit!" he choked.

"Slack off, boy." Pat was grimly unhurried. "They've

left their horses and taken to the rocks. There's the other broncs—" He pointed. Three ponies were milling restlessly below a ledge, ears thrown back wickedly. Perhaps they scented the snakes with which this ragged mountain was infested.

Again the baleful crash of firing assailed their ears, much closer now.

"There they are!" Ezra suddenly bellowed. "Good gravy, look at that!"

There could never have been any real doubt in the minds of Henshew and Art Bickle as to the particular form in which nemesis pursued them. Lying in wait in the midst of this sinister labyrinth with the cool intention of bushwhacking and slaying Pat Stevens—suddenly confronted instead by an implacable Jap, their erstwhile co-conspirator whom, with Buell and Cohan-non, they had cold-bloodedly tricked and betrayed for a handful of dollars never in fact realized—they answered his frenzied opening fire with fear and flight.

Already he had driven them to abandon the horses. Taking to the rocks, they were scrambling madly upward over the rough ledges. Jettisoning every hope but their guns, they speedily split up, scheming to outwit and cut down their vengeful pursuer. Even as Ezra pointed, Art Bickle could be seen crawling perilously along a narrow seam gashing the cliff which blocked his flight. He halted to level his revolver; and shifting their gaze, the watchers spied Jap, toiling grimly up from below. The fact that he drove Libby on before him accounted for the comparative slowness of his advance, his dogged progress more terrifying to watch than haste would have been.

"The crazy bat!" Will apostrophized his brother

tensely. "Can't he see that Libby'll never stop them two from shootin'? They'll cut her down in a second for a chance to get at him!" Sliding out of the saddle, he ran forward hurriedly, only to stop and whirl. "Yore nerves are good, Stevens! Pick Jap off, before the damage is done!"

At the moment, Ezra fastened a restraining grasp on his trembling shoulder. "Git a grip on yoreself, boy," he rumbled. "Anythin' we do now may only upset the apple-cart!"

Bickle was long in firing. Clearly he could not see well, for he leveled the barrel repeatedly. At last his pistol cracked once—twice—thrice. Jap paused a moment and then drilled on, giving Libby a shove which made her reel.

Never trained for this game, Bickle's nerve was fast cracking. Wildly emptying his gun, he plunged away. Inexorably Jap closed in, not bothering to shoot—and a hundred yards to the south, Henshew watched this duel of nerves, fascinated.

Reaching the end of the fissure he followed, the badly rattled cashier gazed about him. A steeply slanted field of loose gravel and boulders ran on up to unseen heights. A man could never win out over that treacherous acclivity. Yet the insane prospect lured. Bickle essayed it. A few feet, and the gravel started! Buried to the knees, Art waved his arms wildly to retain his balance.

Sighting him, Jap vented a raucous laugh, and his sixgun banged. Bickle flattened, almost rolling back to the bottom. He scrambled up. A tiny cavern must have headed the fissure, for he disappeared completely from view, stepping behind the corner of rock.

Jap hesitated, then toiled on, thrusting Libby ahead of him. Skirting the cliff, in no particular haste, they climbed above Bickle's position. They were a hundred feet beyond, at the crest of the gravel slope, before Pat Stevens divined Jap's ruthless purpose.

"Great Josephine!" he ejaculated.

"Libby'll be killed if she slips up there!" gasped Will, stifling a groan. But it was not the girl who stood now in gravest danger, as Pat shrewdly saw.

Bickle was asking himself where that pitiless foe was. He emerged like a lizard from hiding, only to be driven back by a screaming slug from Jap's Colt. Jap called downward, taunting. He kicked a heavy rock loose, and then another. They crashed and banged, missing Bickle's hideout by yards. But it was the slumbering, sinister gravel slant that Pat was keenly watching, waiting for Jap to act.

Jap stepped heavily out on the talus, his boots sinking. He slipped, and then caught himself. But his work was done. Slowly and ponderously, starting from the very top, the gravel started to slide. It trickled, spread, gathered momentum in a whispering, grinding roar.

Bickle foresaw his peril. He darted out, staring up at that swelling, balloon-like dust cloud, a deadly tidal wave of gravel rushing forward beneath the mantling pall. For an instant the cashier stood petrified. Then, with muffled scream, he dived back into his cave. Down the slide flowed like some sullen river, its roar rising thunderously; rolling evenly and smoothly over fissure and cave mouth, to pour its brown niagara majestically into the abyss below.

Dust hazed the air for a thousand yards in every

direction, and it was minutes before probing sight was able to penetrate the pall. Then Sloan pointed dramatically, lines bitten into his round face. Bickle's hiding place had utterly disappeared, buried deep beneath tons of detritus. Not again would Ab Keeler's luckless cashier gaze upon the sun or breathe the untrammelled air. He had been sealed alive into his tomb.

“Look at Jap!” rifled Sam.

The vengeance-mad daredevil was clambering straight in the direction of Henshew's rocky eyrie, leaping all but impossible fissures and scaling breath-shortening ascents. Libby was behind him now, apparently forgotten—dust-choked, tottering, half-blinded, and numb with shock. Will gazed up at her, his face knotted with anguish.

“Damn all of yuh!” he blazed, with iron resolve. “I’m goin’ up there—!”

Pat’s crisp nod was a signal for the others. “We’ll all go. It’ll take some doing to make it without broken bones—”

“Jap’ll never git down again!” Ezra averred sharply. “He’s drivin’ Henshew t’ where neither of ‘em can make a turn!”

It seemed true. But they wasted no time in judging, scrambling hurriedly upward from level to precipitous level, losing sight of the girl, and remarking her position again only after painful effort.

Will was the first to leap across an intervening crevasse and clasp Libby in his protecting arms. She sagged there, striving bravely to support herself.

“Will, Will,” she breathed blindly, clinging to his hard frame. “I knew it would be you—!”

Waiting only to assure himself that the girl was safe for the moment, Pat turned his attention to Jap. With fixed immovable mania, the other was worming his way along a three-inch ledge, as coolly preoccupied as a man utterly alone.

But he was not alone. Yards away, unable to climb farther, clutched in a freezing vise of stark fear, Al Henshew watched Jap's searching hands feel over the edge of the rock. Suddenly his gun banged. Jap thoughtfully let go his hold. Red blood trickled from his hand, and he appeared to be shy a finger. He delayed a moment, flicking the blood off, and crawled on. Though he strove to employ it—needed desperately its use—that hand was now clearly useless, refusing its office. Pat saw him prop himself and haul out his own Colt. With unfamiliar left hand, Jap cocked the gun and it cracked twice in return.

It clicked empty just as Henshew fired again. The slug dusted a powdering of granite over Jap's head, and he sneezed humorlessly. Working his way up precariously from below, Pat saw the man's terrible predicament.

"Jap!" he called. "Come down! You can't get him! You're the last of your crowd. We had to stop Keno, and break Shoshone's leg—and Marble insisted on being shot to rags, there at the ranch. Let us have Al without further bloodshed, and he can stand his chances in court—"

Jap glanced down absently. He heard, but he paid no heed. Pat tried again.

"Jap, you'll never be able to get forward or back," he urged. "Let go and slide straight down the rocks! I'll stop you. It's your only chance!"

Jap's answer was to start cursing Al Henshew luridly. He wound up by flinging his empty gun at the hotelman. Henshew jerked out a cry, and the weapon clattered down the rocks, bouncing far below.

"I'm comin', Al!"

With one torn hand useless, Jap laboriously struggled forward. Henshew's last slug missed him by the hundredth of an inch. He paid absolutely no attention, snarling his malicious gratification as the narrowing gap between them afforded him an unobstructed view of his enemy's distorted face.

"Two minutes, Al!" Jap blared tauntingly. "Then you're goin' over—"

Unable to reach them, Pat stolidly refused to use his gun. He vaguely heard Kyle Kershaw, bawling heated orders from far down the rocks, but did not turn his gaze.

Even in those last slow seconds, Jap took his time. He was making bitterly sure of himself. Wedged in a shallow coign of the rocks, Henshew waited like a cornered wolf at bay. He kicked out fiercely as Jap came close, and then clawed for his balance. He made it with little to spare.

Jap closed with him then. For a long instant the determined madman strove to tear Henshew loose and hurl him down. They grappled fiercely, and Al emitted the terrified squeal of a mortally wounded rabbit. It was inevitable that something should happen. Men could not wrestle thus on a few inches of footing without mishap. Losing their uneasy poise at last, still clasped tightly together, the pair tottered briefly on the brink and then plunged down—down. . . .

"Hang on to her, Kershaw. Don't let go for a second!" Jealously Pat watched the descent of the young people through the rocks, helping where he could as they inched downward. The climb was a hundredfold more terrifying than it had seemed on the way up. They had time now for vivid realization of this immediate nearness of danger, lying heavily on their burdened hearts. Grim and silent, old Kyle met them at last, helping them to negotiate the final ugly slant.

"Father—?" Libby turned entreatingly to Pat, the moment her feet alighted on level ground. "Is it true that he has been—" She was unable to finish.

His nod was mutely compassionate. "Brad met his duty head on, Libby. He's gone."

She turned numbly to Will, walking into his arms as if seeking the only protection left to her in the world. The young fellow held her awkwardly, sharp distress in his face.

"You can't know what you're doin'," he burst out hoarsely. "Yuh saw what Jap was, Libby! I'm just another Kershaw—"

Gone now, all his former boasting of Kershaw quality. Shame for his renegade brother tore him deeply. He could not meet her eyes. Libby looked into his face, scarcely comprehending.

"Don't, Will," she whispered brokenly. "Don't throw Dad at me now! I knew the—truth, from the start almost . . ."

Will stiffened. "What are you drivin' at?" he countered indignantly. "Brad Haley was true blue! He stood up to Marble, there at Buell's ranch, after Marble killed Dude . . . In fact, your Dad prevented that owl-

hoot from draggin' *me* out of the barn. I was there . . .
Don't you understand, Libby? Brad saved my life!"

Libby turned to the others, a dazed question in her beseeching eyes. Pat's firm nod was confirmation in full.

"Will's right," he affirmed. "Haley played a man's part to the hilt. He probably saved us all grief, Libby—at tremendous cost to himself."

"Sure—an' the only thing he could be sorry for," Ezra inserted gruffly, "would be t' see you two young folks stallin' now. No fool like a young fool—I allus say," he concluded sagaciously.

Sam had to put in his own word as well. "Do we need t' argue the point?" he fired at Will severely, with twinkling eyes. "After losin' a father as good as hers was, Libby *needs* some hombre about yore size t' look after her! Yore own old man ain't no slouch," he winked ponderously at Kyle. "Likely he'll do her, too, in a pinch . . . Dang it, Kershaw—git wise, before I grab that fine girl for myself!"

Will missed his snaggle-toothed grin altogether, taking the hint with alacrity. But the eagerness with which Libby Haley surrendered herself to the young fellow's bearish clasp, said all too plainly that she agreed with the stocky little man without reservation.



